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**STATE AND POWER AFTER NEOLIBERALISM
IN BOLIVARIAN VENEZUELA**

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ABSTRACT

State and Power after Neoliberalism in Bolivarian Venezuela

Donald V. Kingsbury

State and Power after Neoliberalism in Bolivarian Venezuela examines the limits and possibilities of collective subject formation in the context of social transformation. It argues that the Bolivarian process was made possible by new forms of political community and collective life that emerged in resistance to the neoliberal restructuring of state and society in the 1980s and 1990s. Specifically, the cycle of struggles that began with the *caracazo* of 1989 opened a terrain for groups from the margins of Venezuelan society to mobilize and shape politics in that country. By the end of the twentieth century, grassroots pressure from below and the state's abandonment of its side of the social contract resulted in a situation of ungovernability in Venezuela. The government of Hugo Chávez has worked to capture the creative energy of these elements, but has yet to definitively break with the norms and institutions of the sovereign nation-state. This dissertation presents the theoretical consequences of this undecided balance of forces as a reconfiguration of the modern dialectic between constituent and constituted power. Focusing on moments where the government has failed to capture the force of what the Marxist-Spinozist tradition has identified as the multitude, I argue Bolivarian Venezuela offers an important site from which to reconsider key elements of modern liberal thought such as the citizen, the nation, and the social contract as well as more recent critical concepts such as the multitude, hegemony, and populism.

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Introduction

In a series of interviews published in English in 2005, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez described an early and characteristic example of his government's social programs. The Plan Bolívar 2000, he said, was

a civilian-military plan (...) My order to my men was: 'go house to house combing the land. Hunger is the enemy.' And we started on February 27, 1999, ten years after the *caracazo*, as a way of redeeming the military. I even made the connection when I said, 'ten years ago we came out to massacre the people, now we are going to fill them with love. Go and comb the land, search out and destroy poverty and death. We are going to fill them with life instead of lead.' And the response was really beautiful (74).

There is much here that is typical of the Bolivarian Revolution in discourse and policy. In his explanation, we see Chávez's penchant for folksy poetry ("...fill them with life instead of lead...") in a discursive universe defined by the enduring historical and symbolic economy of Venezuela (Simón Bolívar, *el caracazo*).¹ We can also see here an ever-present awareness of the immediate past and the gains that have been made since the rewriting of the constitution in 1999 ("...we started on February 27, 1999, ten years after...") and the unilateral, absolute, and martial personal style of Chávez that approaches the political and social problems of the country as military

¹ Simón Bolívar, the early nineteenth century Creole hero, led the armies that freed the present day countries of Venezuela, Colombia, Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador. The figure of Bolívar has become mythical since the death of *el Libertador* in 1830. *El caracazo* will be a key historical touchstone in this dissertation. At present I would simply like to flag first that the *caracazo* was an insurrection against neoliberal structural adjustment programs and military crackdown in 1989 that resulted in the death of up to 3,000 Venezuelans. In the years since the uprising, the *caracazo* has been imagined by many sympathetic to the government as the starting point of the Bolivarian Revolution's 'popular' phase. The *caracazo* was in other words the moment in which the social movements necessary for the election of Hugo Chávez in 1998 became a recognized force in Venezuelan politics.

matters (“...*my* order...*my* men...”, “...*destroy* poverty and death.”). Finally, Chávez emphasizes the theme of redemption for not only the people of Venezuela, but in particular for socially centered morals and the role of the state in the development of the population.

The Plan Bolívar – which would be quietly dismantled in 2001 amid charges of corruption – made liberal observers nervous. Like many of the government’s programs, it “aim[ed] broadly at incorporating the armed forces into domestic political and economic affairs.” Few would be willing to take umbrage with the Plan’s goal of “refurbishing and constructing infrastructure, providing health care for the poor, combating illiteracy and unemployment, and distributing food” (Trinkunas 2002, 68). However, for many observers, any potential blurring of the lines that separate the barracks from civil society is cause for concern, *especially* in Latin America. While these arguments tend to admit “these military-led efforts at alleviating poverty and stimulating economic development may provide significant public benefits,” such advances are often analytically and normatively valued inversely to the extent that “they have come at the expense of civilian participation and leadership in these areas” (69). The memory of human rights abuses under military rule throughout much of the region had already made many nervous at the election of a former Lieutenant Colonel to the presidency. When Chávez called on the military to take up an active role in civilian affairs – even if for the purpose of humanitarian and social service provision – fears of an authoritarian reversal seemed to be confirmed.

This anxiety around civilian leadership fails to register the high degree of corruption among civilian political elites in Venezuela.² It also, more importantly, fails to differentiate between types of civilian rule and the forms democracy can take. For example, even though military rule had given way to elections, Latin America as a region saw a drastic increase in inequality during the transition to democracy. Democratization was no doubt sincerely welcomed in the region, but the sorcerer's trick of splitting and over-valuing the formal procedures of liberal representative democracy over social values like equality and fairness was not. In the words of Sara Motta (2010) this trend is evidence of a deeper trend in which "democracy, liberalism, and the capitalist state and market become naturalized as opposed to historically specific ways of organizing economic political power." Motta continues that as a result, "alternative ways of organizing power and institutionalizing government are excluded from analysis, as are nonliberal articulations of democracy" (1). Following Motta, my interest in this dissertation rests not with the Venezuelan military *per se*, but rather with the ways in which the changing role of the Venezuelan military in this instance is symptomatic of a more general experimentation with non-liberal forms of government. These nonliberal, postliberal, or hybrid-liberal formations in

² Corruption is a perennial problem in Venezuela, one that predates and has by no means been solved by the Chávez government. In 1996 a former staffer at the Inter-American Development bank argued that the country faced four significant cultural barriers to overcoming persistent patterns of maldevelopment: "1) the country's pervasive "culture" of corruption, 2) the absence of civic values, 3) low levels of citizen involvement in the community, and 4) a dearth of leadership" (Coronel 1996, 157). While the Bolivarian Revolution has certainly made significant inroads on points two through four, its rhetorical battle against corruption remains at the top of many grassroots activists' agendas (Lander 2007, 2008)

contemporary Venezuela are the primary focus of this dissertation. I argue that the symbolic, intersubjective, and structural production of individual and collective subjectivities is specific to the conjuncture, which in the present is defined by the end of neoliberalism and the project of ‘twenty first century socialism.’ The complex interplay between subjects, the state, and the international economic and political systems has resulted in the need to rethink power, the state, and social transformation. Venezuela, as one of the first sites in the world to take up this challenge on a sustained and explicitly anti-neoliberal (and rhetorically anti-capitalist) basis is one of the most important locations from which to rethink these vital components of the world system’s architecture.

The relationship between radical social forces and any given state, for Marxists and ‘the left’ more generally, tends for any number of reasons to be seen as one of contention or outright antagonism. ‘The state’ is generally understood along the lines of Louis Althusser’s (2001) formulation as providing the ideological and repressive supports necessary for the maintenance of the capitalist mode of production. In Venezuela, however, this relation is rendered more complex in that the government in power explicitly positions itself against most traditional *bêtes noires* of the local and global left while supporting progressive social forces both at home and abroad. Today’s Bolivarian Revolution claims to be the result of social movements dating back to the mid-twentieth century dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1948-1958) including the fight against landlordism in the countryside, the struggles for local and indigenous autonomy, and for black power, socialism, and squatters’ rights in the

slums of the nation's ever-growing cities (Sanoja 2008). Moreover, the Bolivarian Revolution does not make these claims in what has come to be the recognizable liberal trope of the infinite reformability and inclusiveness of contemporary representative market democracies. The government of Hugo Chávez paints itself in explicitly anti-capitalist hues while declaring itself to be in the pursuit of 'Socialism for the 21st century.'³ Thus, against global discourses that identify liberal and representative (and above all else, market friendly) democracy with 'good governance,' the Bolivarian Revolution claims to be building a different type of state power and reconfiguring the relation between state and society.

George Ciccariello-Maher (2007) describes this emerging dynamic in terms of Lenin's formulation of dual power. He is particularly interested in bodies like the *consejos comunales* (communal councils) and the now defunct *círculos bolivarianos* (Bolivarian Circles) with which he contends we can see

the construction of an autonomous, alternative power capable of challenging the existing state structure—we can see that the establishment of communal councils in Venezuela is clearly a positive step toward the development of fuller and deeper democracy, which is encouraging in and of itself. But the councils' significance goes beyond that. The consolidation of communal power says much about the role of the state in the Venezuelan Revolution. Specifically, what is unique about the Venezuelan situation is the fact that sectors of the state are working actively to dismantle and dissolve the old state apparatus by devolving power to local organs capable of constituting a dual power. Transcending the simplistic debate between taking or opposing state power, a focus on dual power allows us to concentrate on what really matters in Venezuela and elsewhere: the revolutionary transformation of existing repressive [state] structures. (42)

³ Enrique Dussel (1995) and Walter Mignolo (2005) explicitly argue against this notion of European liberal modernity as a reformable and inclusive system, a position they attribute most characteristically to Jürgen Habermas (1989).

From the ‘dual power’ perspective the form of state power currently incubating in Venezuela is one that constantly seeks to revolutionize itself. This line of analysis is certainly easier to defend at the level of rhetoric than at that of structural transformation, despite a number of pioneering legislative reforms since 2006 that have sought to decentralize power to the neighborhood level (Motta 2010).⁴ The goal of these reforms, inconclusive may they be at this time, is the end of the capitalist state of Venezuela’s past, the dispossession of traditional elites, and the radical redistribution of wealth in this oil rich nation. While the results of this process are impossible to predict at present, these attempts at altering the balance of power between the state, the market, and society threatens to break with patterns of modern-liberal governance and the very definition of each of these constituent elements. The process is furthermore unique in the contemporary world system in that the contemporary Venezuelan state seeks to *push beyond itself* – rather than defend its current composition and role – through intensifying local and global antagonisms between the privileged and excluded.

This pursuit of antagonism – of the state’s active participation in the *political* empowerment of the poor majority to the detriment of the historically dominant minority – is also at odds with previous practices of state-led development in Venezuela. Kevin Neuhouser (1992) notes that throughout the post-dictatorship

⁴ Motta also notes that a number of liberal critics of the current government see this sort of maneuver as a re-tooling of classical populist politics, in that it circumvents the legislature and the judiciary’s role in the running of the national government (see, characteristically, Castañeda 2006; Corrales and Penfold-Becerra 2007; Kirk Hawkins and Hansen 2006).

period of the Fourth Republic (1958-1998), Venezuelan workers were the “best paid in Latin America,” their high wages, however, did not cut too deeply into the profits of local or transnational capital, as firms paid “the lowest taxes in the region,” an equilibrium the state was able to maintain through its manipulation of massive oil rents up until the 1980s (128). The result was something of a correspondence of the interests of workers with that of capital – or at least among the politically powerful but rather small petroleum economy’s working classes, their bosses, and the developmentalist Venezuelan state (Tinker Salas 2009, 11).⁵ At the level of material bases and relations of production, however, there remains concern among some observers on the left that macroeconomic policy and especially this pattern of ground-rent distribution remains the basis of the Venezuelan economy under Chávez (Nakatani and Herrera 2008). While I will address this concern with what I call the *democratization of consumption* – or, the more equitable distribution of oil rent and the general increase in buying power and consumption for the majority of Venezuelans without corresponding or enduring alterations to the fundamental economic and class structure of the economy – my approach to the Bolivarian Revolution takes a slightly different angle. In this dissertation I take from this potentially paradoxical situation – the rhetorical commitment to class struggle and the construction of socialism in the context of Venezuela’s enduring entanglement in the global petroleum trade and its local consequences – to ask how this tense constellation of forces occasions a

⁵ For more on the Venezuelan state of this era as (often misguidedly) developmentalist and fiscally rent-based, see Coronil (1997) and Karl (1997).

rethinking of recent and long-standing conventions surrounding the nature of social forces, the state, and political change in modern political thought.

The years from the 1980s until the turn of the twenty first century in Venezuela and much of Latin America are known collectively as the ‘lost decades,’ due to the social and political consequences of the ‘Washington Consensus.’ Accordingly, states throughout the world retreated from previously agreed upon welfare roles and shifted focus to the “favoring of strong individual property rights, the rule of law, and the institutions of freely functioning markets and free trade” (Harvey 2005, 64). In other words, the state by no means ‘disappeared.’ Its mandate to defend classical liberal economic and political values required a strong judiciary and police force to safeguard private property was, in fact, strengthened.

Venezuela was, famously, no exception to this rule. Indeed, the shock was perhaps all the more significantly felt in post-dictatorship Venezuela⁶ in that the country’s immense oil wealth had for a time produced – *at the level of the imaginary* – a self-perception of the population as middle class and a widespread expectation of upward mobility across the social spectrum. According to Miguel Pérez Pirela (2008), this “symbolic” representation (or perhaps, obfuscation) first collapsed on 18 February 1983 – Venezuela’s ‘Black Friday’ – when an oil and debt fueled speculative bubble burst. According to Pirela,

from an economic point of view, the existence of the majority of the population that was not only poor, but who lived without even the minimum social and institutional guarantee of subsistence, was discovered. Since 1973

⁶ The era spanning from the fall of the Marcos Pérez Jiménez dictatorship in January 1958 to the present.

(the year in which the 15-year spike in the price of petroleum began)
Venezuela had lived in a kind of economic and political presentism (22).⁷

Pirela highlights a key dynamic on which this dissertation focuses: how social collectivities are formed within political and economic contexts to which they are not reducible. This of course is not meant to suggest that politics and the economy – if indeed we can discuss these terms in isolation – fall out of the analytical picture all together. Far from it. The approach I employ in this dissertation focuses on the dialectical relation between these ‘objective’ conditions and the ‘subjective’ understandings that interpret, form, and are formed by processes and attributes that might otherwise be considered ‘structural.’ Here, Pirela is once again instructive. After the Black Friday collapse, he writes, the middle class was *economically* and *materially* “declassed.” However, at the symbolic level, “they continued and continue to claim an economic status that had already disappeared.” He concludes, “the fact that symbolic reality is not the same thing as de facto reality does not in any way negate its status as reality” (24). It would thus be a tactical and analytical error to dismiss the perhaps *objectively* delusional claims of the Venezuelan middle class as ‘false consciousness.’ The ‘false’ in the well-worn expression incorrectly implies a weakness or error, obscuring the tenacity and force of such convictions. It also assumes a ‘correct’ politics can be located, and more importantly, *that everyone can access and*

⁷ “Desde el punto de vista económico, se descubrió la existencia de una parte mayoritaria de la población que no era solamente pobre, sino que además vivía sin las garantías sociales e institucionales mínimas para subsistir. Venezuela a partir de 1973 (año en que comienza el alza del petróleo que durará casi quince años) había vivido en una suerte de <<presentismo económico y político>>.” My translation. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

understand it. The theory of false consciousness thus requires a shared political substance or identity; it posits an ontological sameness that can recuperate a whole body politic if only ‘in the final instance.’ Any cursory study of recent Venezuelan political history, to which I will turn shortly, offers grim support for this sort of *agonistic* reading of the conflicts and antagonisms animating social transformations such as the Bolivarian Revolution.⁸

This then, is a dissertation about Venezuela and the dynamics that have emerged between radical social forces and the Venezuelan state. It is also concerned with questions of political thought that stretch beyond Venezuela and touch on the trajectory of Marxist praxis in the twenty-first century and on the constitution and development of social blocs in a world that is ever more urban, ‘slummed,’ unequal, and contaminated. In the process, this dissertation also evaluates the status of a few key concepts in the critical theories of the past century – hegemony, discourse, myth, populism, and subjectivity. Thus, while this dissertation is based on fieldwork conducted during 2007 and 2008 – where my work as an instructor in the Ministry of Planning and Development’s *Escuela Venezolana de Planificación* and *Misión Ríbas* allowed me to interact with rank-and-file *Chavistas*, community organizers, and to meet participants in the social movements and forces that made the government of Hugo Chávez possible – it is also and equally concerned with theoretical problems surrounding political and social transformation in and after neoliberalism.

⁸ This is not to suggest that the Bolivarian Revolution has been a particularly bloody affair. Chávez and his supporters often refer to the revolution as *pacífica, pero armada* (peaceful, but armed). My concern is rather to gesture toward the high degree of incommensurability among positions in contemporary Venezuela.

With recent events in Venezuela as my guide, my most general and perhaps most banal contention is that the relationship between state and power – or better, *powers* – is specific to the conjuncture. The modern liberal ‘state-form’ or ‘state power’ is one – and I would suggest only one – form that can result from the dynamic of *constituent* and *constituted* powers. These terms are key to this dissertation and form the terrain on which its theoretical interventions rest. The first, constituent power, connotes the immanent, creative (and often destructive), expansive, democratic power of collective life. We shall see it expressed in the dissertation’s study of the *caracazo* as an event that both challenged state power and created new forms of community before it was silenced in a military crackdown. Constituent power is raw potential, and I argue that it establishes the ground on which all politics rest (even and perhaps especially when this power is denied). The second term, constituted power, references the static, formal, and rationalized power of states and other institutions. Constituted power represents itself as the representative or vessel of constituent power. I argue in this dissertation that this is only rarely the case.

One of this dissertation’s core objectives will be to construct a theoretical vocabulary up to the descriptive task of locating this dialectic in the Bolivarian Revolution and the normative task of not only recognizing new forms of political subjectivity involved but also of assessing the stakes of their respective political projects. One thus cannot speak of ‘the state-form’ *in material terms* as an ahistorical or singular entity; nor can one speak of the social blocs – citizens, classes, subjects – that produce and are produced by ‘the state’ as transcendental unities. Rather, the state

has had and continues to have a number of often-overlapping and contradictory functions and formations – sovereign, governmental, and security, functions that contribute to the imagined and lived experiences of subjects (Foucault 2009).

When considered in this light, the very notion of a self-contained or transcendental dialectic between ‘state’ and ‘civil society’ – or in the language of this dissertation, between constituent and constituted power – becomes a convention that can no longer be assumed to be self-evident. Constituent and constituted power remain as linked today as they have throughout the history of the liberal republic, but this may in large part be because these are the terms in which we look for them. Constituent and constituted power as we conceive of them presently cannot but be linked. They define one another, if negatively. I contend that Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution places this problematic squarely at the center of the proverbial table in the debate of ‘what is to be done’ by reopening the question of state power after many in the post-Cold War left and right consensually agreed on the state’s undesirability as a tool for social transformation.

I address this problematic in this dissertation through recourse to what I call ‘the transition question’ that refers both to the Marxist problematic around ‘the transition to socialism’ as well as a perhaps more open-ended focus on contingency, subject-formation, and the possibility for social change in fragmented societies. This second aspect of ‘transitions’ is more often associated with post-structuralist criticism, and while much of the language of this body of scholarship features in this dissertation, my key concern will remain an investigation into the limits and potentials

of how we organize and understand the social. More concretely I will ask if as some would have it we are living in an era in which changes in material relations have rendered previous ideological formations such as ‘the people,’ *‘el pueblo,’* or ‘the nation’ both descriptively and proscriptively impotent, then what comes next?⁹

In this, I am particularly interested in the theoretical and political possibilities opened by the concept of the multitude, described by Jon Beasley Murray (2011) as “a social subject that constitutes itself through resonance and the logic of encounter on the plane of immanence, offering the prospect of forms of community that might do without transcendence, without either the state or sovereignty” (11). The multitude differs from concepts like the people and the nation, then, in that it neither relies upon nor orients itself toward the political state for its composition, definition, or direction. It is more force than subject and it refuses the stasis, identity, and groundedness of other, more familiar collective social formations. The question and the concept of the multitude has been raised in theoretical work following the fall of the ‘actually existing socialisms’ of the Soviet model as some thinkers on the left have sought a new ‘agent of history’ more suited to changes in the economic and political bases of the world system. I am interested, then, in the degree to which concepts like the multitude adequately describe the social composition of Bolivarian Venezuela. How can we identify the multitude? In what ways does it become an agent and a force? What sort of efficacy or organization can it have? For how long? That is, even if notions such as

⁹ For arguments in favor of this post-ideological position, see most characteristically Beasley-Murray (2004), Hardt and Negri (2000, 2005, 2009), Williams (2002) and Virno (2004).

the multitude do accurately describe the texture of Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution, the completion with which many of its theorists speak is by no means justified given the fluid nature of social relations, conflicts, and institutions upon which most theories of the multitude rest.

This contingent nature of the state form and social power in Venezuela has global as well as local attributes. Within Venezuela, the state's dominant role in the economy has made it both terrain of and participant in social antagonisms since the early twentieth century. However, the state's developmental policies and attempts to mediate internal class conflict cannot be understood without attention to what Fernando Coronil (1997) describes, in a minor addendum to World Systems Theory, as the global division of labor and nature.¹⁰ That is to say, the state's form and content is not determined in a vacuum, but is wrought by endogenous and exogenous forces. These factors, most notably the financialization of global capitalism since the 1970s and the way in which this structuring of reality reproduces Venezuela's near-singular reliance on the petroleum industry all reinforce the durability of the rentier capitalist state.

This dissertation then, seeks to make three contributions to the fields of contemporary political theory and the politics of transition, and specifically, the study of the contemporary transition in Venezuela. First, I outline a conceptualization of the state as a fluid *terrain* of struggle while taking care to avoid *both* economism's base-

¹⁰ For a general introduction to World Systems Theory, see Wallerstein (2004). For the specificity of Latin America and Europe's conquest of the Americas as necessary preconditions for the Modern Capitalist World System in socio-political as well as epistemological terms, see Wallerstein and Quijano (1992) and Mignolo (2000).

superstructure determinism – where the laws and institutions of the state apparatus are entirely reducible to the economic mode of production – as well as what I see as the equally limited notion that the state is an autonomous ‘tool,’ distinct from class power and hence instrumentally available – e.g., for capture by ballot or bullet – for any sort of project of social transformation.¹¹

Secondly, this dissertation contributes to the still too small body of literature that examines the Bolivarian Revolution as a complex and contradictory totality that can in no way be reduced to the person of Hugo Chávez. Mainstream and liberal analyses of the Bolivarian Revolution tend to place disproportionate focus on Chávez and are all too often based on an unexplored or disavowed normative investment in liberal institutional, representative, and procedural forms of democracy. My approach attempts to grasp the dynamics of the current transition in Venezuela in a manner that avoids the errors of voluntarism – represented at an extreme where all agency is reduced to the singularity of the charismatic leader – and structural determinism – where the place of politics and the formation of subjects is uniquely that of their place in economic production. I am interested rather in how both of these extreme positions are terrains upon which constituted power attempts the capture and transformation of constituent power, and hence also triggers innovation and resistance on the part of the multitude. The chapters of this dissertation can be seen as various examples of this dynamic, illustrating how discourse, myth, and space all constrain and direct the potential forms that individual and collective subjects can take.

¹¹ If only to flag the matter here, I am particularly interested in this debate as framed by Nicos Poulantzas (2008, 27–28).

Finally, if my first two aims problematize spaces of struggle and the social forces that traverse them, the third attempts a rethinking of some key theoretical terms deployed to explain mass politics in Venezuela (and beyond). In particular, I am interested in the debate around the status of the related interpretive and normative notions of hegemony and populism. These concepts are particularly ill suited for the analysis of the Bolivarian Revolution, I argue, in that they both rely upon and *bolster* transcendental and representative notions of politics. If we are to approach the Bolivarian Revolution on its own terms, I will suggest, analytical tools like populism and hegemony that naturalize mediation require significant revision or outright rejection. Rather than approaching the Bolivarian Revolution in the language of ‘consolidated,’ ‘agonistic,’ or otherwise ‘liberal’ democracy – all of which I will argue are entailed in the theoretical constructs of hegemony and populism – we would be better suited by developing an approach to politics that focuses on habit, rupture, and antagonism.

In what follows, I more fully flesh out what I mean in proposing an examination of ‘state and power after Neoliberalism in Bolivarian Venezuela.’ I start by outlining key dynamics of the political scene in Venezuela through an analysis of elections and state power from 1998-2009. I then move to an introduction of the social composition of the Bolivarian Revolution and of ‘Chavistas’ as autonomous but strongly allied forces within the larger sequence of social transformation usually identified with the Venezuelan government. I then discuss the state-form, both as an analytical object within the terms of this dissertation but also as a theoretical and

political problem for the left in the post-Cold War era. Before outlining the chapters of this dissertation, I then introduce the dissertation's guiding interest in the dynamics between constituent and constituted power and the degree to which these poles of force and authority are specific to or break out of the modern liberal tradition.

I. The Institutional Space of the Bolivarian Revolution: An Accounting of Forces

In this and the next section I discuss aspects of the institutional makeup of the Bolivarian Revolution between the first election of Hugo Chávez in 1998 and the 2009 Constitutional Referendum.¹² This period is significant in that it is characterized by all but complete control of the state apparatus by *chavistas* and the relative disarray of the domestic political opposition.¹³ I spend significant space here discussing electoral politics and campaigns not to reinforce the notion that the ballot box is *the* site where power is ultimately expressed and realized. Indeed, as Jon Beasley-Murray (2010) has suggested, elections should be seen as retroactive registers of social change; Chávez and other elected officials of the ostensible left are in other words the *beneficiaries* rather than the architects and agents of society's transformation (127).

¹² The chief target of this referendum was the elimination of constitutionally mandated term limits for elected officials. This provision was also a highly controversial element of the failed 2007 referendum.

¹³ The term *chavista* is misleading to the extent that it flattens the rather diverse political scene in Venezuela, reinforcing the faulty notion that Chávez is the cause rather than the result of grassroots politics in Venezuela. I will maintain throughout this dissertation that roughly considered 'left' politics and social forces in Venezuela cannot and must not be reduced to the figure of the president. However, the term is at the very least useful, as shall be argued in what follows, in the consideration of electoral contests in that it reflects the reality that electorally, Chávez consistently outperforms candidates or proposals he endorses.

From 1998-2009 the political opposition to what is referred to in Venezuela as ‘el proceso,’¹⁴ consistently failed – due either to faults in strategy and vision or tactics and message – to establish any significant constituency or institutional presence.¹⁵ A cursory examination of polling data across the rich experience of 21st century Venezuelan electoral politics illustrates at least one aspect of this trend:

Election	Winner and Winner's Percentage	Turnout (Percentage of eligible voters and actual number)
President , 6 Dec, 1998	Chavez 62.46%	63.76% (6,537,304)
Approval of New Constitution 15 Dec, 1999	Yes 71.83%	44.38% (4,819,056)
President 30 July, 2000	Chavez 59.76%	56.50% (6,288,578)
Presidential Recall 15 Aug, 2004	Chavez 59.10%	69.92% (9,815,631)
President 3 Dec, 2006	Chavez 62.84%	74.06% (11,790,397)

¹⁴ The process – a distinction that recognizes the inevitably messy, open, combined and uneven course of a project such as this.

¹⁵ Recently, this balance of forces has become less one-sidedly favorable for the government. Since the September 2010 National Assembly elections the most significant opposition parties coordinated under the banner of the Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (Coalition for Democratic Unity, MUD), a break from their long-standing trend of in-fighting and extra-parliamentary tactics in their campaign against the Bolivarian Revolution. The MUD won 65 of 165 seats, with the PSUV (United Socialist Party of Venezuela) winning 95, preventing the government from the needed two-thirds majority needed to pass legislation without compromising with the right (Fuentes 2010).

Constitutional Referendum 2 Dec, 2007	A: No 50.70%* B: No 51.05%*	56.81% (9,002,439)
Constitutional Referendum 15 Feb, 2009	Yes – 54.85%	70.33% (11,710,740)

Figure 0.1 Seven Presidential elections and four referenda during the Bolivarian Revolution, 1998-2010. (www.electionguide.org, www.cne.gob.ve).
*The 2007 Constitutional Referendum was divided into two groups of proposed changes to the Venezuelan Constitution. The pro-Chávez vote failed by a slim margin.

With the exception of the Constitutional Referendum in 2007 the *Chavista* portion of the vote steadily increased since 1998. The opposition vote, on the other hand, has always hovered on one side or the other of the four million votes mark. It is important to note as well that these elections should serve only as mile-markers. Since the election of the Chávez government in 1998, Venezuelans have gone to the polls or taken part in tens of elections; in addition to elections for mayors, governors, and National Assembly representatives, votes have been held for establishing Communal Councils, Rural Land Committees, and for the formation of organizing cells and then ‘battalions’ for the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV for its initials in Spanish). Indeed, a point of pride often raised in interviews with PSUV militants is that the party, created in 2007 to replace the moribund and widely discredited MVR (Fifth Republic Movement, for its initials in Spanish),¹⁶ is Venezuela’s *first* internally-

¹⁶ The MVR was created as an electoral vehicle for Chávez’s first candidacy in 1998. The party was a coalition stitching together a number of left and centrist parties on the shared conviction that a complete break with the Fourth Republic was necessary for Venezuela to recover from the ‘lost decades’ of the 1980s and 1990s. By the time of the 2007 referendum, a number of moderate and middle class parties had left the coalition and joined the political opposition. What is more, the MVR faced mounting dissatisfaction among the *Chavista* rank-and-file who increasingly saw it as a body of opportunistic and bureaucratic holdovers from the old order.

democratic party – the primary and nomination processes for candidates in the 2008 regional elections took over a year of mobilization, debate, and no shortage of controversy among party militants. The opposition, which historically had much difficulty in forming an umbrella anti-government bloc has not followed suit (García-Guadilla 2005; Petkoff 2008). When they have been able to unify around a single candidate, the nomination has been the result of negotiations (often held in the United States, Puerto Rico, or Peru) of the various parties' leadership rather than any sort of public consultation or debate.¹⁷ The result, at least among pro-government forces, has been a near-constant preparation and mobilization, intense debate, and – among the rank-and-file *chavistas* I interviewed – an expressed pride in the collective project of democratization. The government and the social movements associated with it often pose their democratic credentials against the opposition's history of coup attempts (in 2002), lockout strikes (2002-2003), working with foreign powers (one of the largest opposition parties, *Primero Justicia*, started its life as a National Endowment for Democracy-funded Non-Governmental Organization), and violent disruptions (such as *Plan Guarimba*, which shut down major sections of the capital in 2005 and 2006, and the armed attacks of anti-government student protesters against the nominally pro-government School of Social Work at the Central University of Venezuela in 2007).

¹⁷ The 2012 presidential race has been the first in which the opposition held primaries that settled on the nomination of Henrique Capriles Radonski, heir to the Grupo Capriles media empire, to run against Chávez for the presidency.

When the opposition has been able to unite under the minimum program of ‘not Chávez’ their polling numbers have remained consistent. The opposition continues to draw on a core constituency of 30-35% of Venezuelans. These are for the most part citizens who either benefited or thought they benefited from the old order: white collar PDVSA employees sacked by Chávez after the 2003 lockout, merchants in the import sector, large rural land owners, elements of the ‘labor aristocracy,’ and other Venezuelans who in conversations argue that class conflict in their country was *created* by Chávez. These Venezuelans will never vote for Chávez, regardless of the opposition’s platform (see also García-Guadilla 2005; Herrera Salas 2005; Pérez Pirela 2008; Tinker Salas 2009).

The result by the time of the 2009 referendum has been something of a political, cultural, and economic stalemate. One of the central terrains of this stalemate has been occupied by the Venezuelan state itself. Indeed, I have increasingly come to see the state itself as the symptom of a sort of impasse that prolongs the country’s ongoing and ever-intensifying social antagonisms. Indeed, the state is perhaps *the* key player in the domestic economy. Any struggle focused on redistributing wealth must therefore pass through the state not only as the provider of the country’s administrative and juridical framework, but as a key interested player in the struggle itself.

The rich need the state to enforce order, and to protect property. In Venezuela, this has historically been the case in a way slightly lateral to the traditional Leninist conceptualization of the state as dictatorship of the dominant class in a given

global historical moment. The particularities of the rentier-oil economy and what Fernando Coronil (1997) describes as the “global division of nature” has meant that in Venezuela the state is actually a key player in the economy as well. In its role as landlord and distributor of the spoils of the petrol economy, the state in Venezuela has itself historically been a *source* of wealth for the most privileged sectors of Venezuelan society. The poor on the other hand hope the state can be a tool for change, that it has equally though inversely magical powers that can be dedicated to engineering a more just world. For the poor, the state can be a weapon that redistributes land, provides access to education and health care, and protects squatters from the violence of landlords. The two types of states envisioned by each position are of course distinct. While both conceive of the state as a sort of tool or weapon, the first sees it as an enforcer of order while the second looks to the state to transform, to break and to build, up to and including the transformation of the very state form itself.

In today’s Venezuela, neither aspiration has been satisfied. The state apparatus and the Chávez administration by which it is currently occupied straddles this national frustration while it cobbles together whatever ‘Socialism for the 21st Century’ will mean. The state is thus both embodiment of an impasse – of the struggle between rich and poor – and is animated by an impasse – what I describe as the gap between constituent and constituted power.

It is for this reason that in this dissertation I will argue that elections and mass, vertically integrated and directed political campaigns – central activities of politics

anywhere today – do not and cannot make revolution. In examining the gap between mobilization and institutionalization, social transformation in Venezuela has not come about as the result of elections, but rather often *in spite of* the institutions of formal, procedural democracy of which government spokespersons are so proud. Indeed, separating the Bolivarian Revolution, or elements of the Bolivarian Revolution, from the so-called ‘classical populism’ theorized around Peronismo in mid-twentieth century Argentina entails looking beyond the constant mobilization and politicization of the population (Conniff 1999b; Germani, diTella, and Ianni 1973; Laclau 2005). Put differently, I will ask whether mobilizing the vote entails a realization of *constituent power* or if it on the contrary represents a channeling, a redirecting, of this capacity of human communities. As will often be the case in this dissertation, history provides insight to this sort of theoretical impasse. And vice versa.

II. From Fourth to Fifth Republican Venezuela

This section introduces the social composition of the Bolivarian Revolution that underlies and traverses the electoral and state dynamics just discussed. Two assertions guide this brief sociological introduction. The first is that social antagonism is prior to and will extend beyond the presidency of Hugo Chávez. Secondly, the ostensible *chavista* base is much more autonomous from the government and leadership than most existing analyses of Venezuela admit. After this section on social forces and their relation to the Venezuelan state, I then move into an introduction of the theoretical interventions of this dissertation in terms of constituent and constituted power.

In 1998 Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías, the former military conspirator behind a failed 1992 coup that catapulted him to national prominence on his way to the brig, was elected in the midst of widespread public dissatisfaction with the Venezuelan Fourth Republic. Years of mismanagement of oil revenues, nepotism, corporatism, clientelism, and an ideologically exclusionary representative-democratic system resulted by the 1990s in widespread voter absenteeism and public protest (Corrales 2002; López Maya 2005; Pérez Pirela 2008). Closer examination of that first *Chavista* vote exposes what has come to be recognized as one of the common traits of so-called “classical” populism: a cross-class coalition of supporters unified around an anti-institutional – or at the very least, an *anti-incumbent* – general sentiment (Ellner 2008; Wilpert 2007). To borrow a slogan from anti-IMF and anti-government protests in Argentina occurring around the time of Chávez’s election, the dominant motif was more ‘¡Que se vayan todos!’ (*Throw them all out!*) than a unified endorsement of the then rather heterodox and murky platforms of the ‘Fifth Republic Movement.’¹⁸

Despite the fact that this multi-class *chavista* bloc shifted and then shattered almost immediately, there was little organized political opposition in the country capable of mounting any serious electoral challenge to the new government. Left in

¹⁸ Rather than making any attempt to work within the existing party structure, dominated by the parties Acción Democrática (Democratic Action, or AD) or COPEI (Comité de Organizaciones Democrática Elecotrales Independientes), which had by that time discredited themselves and the entire representatively democratic edifice they had constructed since the fall of the last dictatorship in 1958, Chávez and the movements with which he was aligned created the ‘Fifth Republic Movement’ (MVR for its initials in Spanish) that put a constituent assembly to rewrite Venezuela’s constitution, as the centerpiece of its platform.

disarray by the precipitous collapse of the forty year old *puntofijo*¹⁹ system and over a decade of International Monetary Fund (IMF) inspired and imposed structural adjustment, the role of political opposition was filled by the private media and a small handful of political parties that started life as United States-funded Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) (Golinger 2008).²⁰ During the four years between Chávez's first assuming office in 1998 and the failed coup of April, 2002, the social polarization that has always crept just below the surface of Venezuela's self-representation as an 'exceptional democracy' in an otherwise impoverished, unequal, and restive region was increasingly impossible to ignore (see, for example, the edited volume by Ellner and Tinker Salas 2007b).

As convention would have it, this increasingly politicized and polarized population hinged upon the actions of the very charismatic Chávez (Ellner 2001). As opposition intransigence became increasingly explicitly right wing in its expression, a growing majority of Venezuelans – the marginal, the dispossessed, the slum dwellers,

¹⁹ Venezuela's main political parties signed the *puntofijo* pact in 1958 after the fall of Marcos Pérez Jiménez. The agreement established the 'rules of the game' in the post-dictatorship era, with signatory parties agreeing to respect the constitution and the results of elections in the future. The pact effectively banned the Communist Party of Venezuela, and cemented the dominance of *Acción Democrática* (Democratic Party, AD) and *COPEI* (Comité de Organizaciones Político Electoral Independientes) until the collapse of the Venezuela's 'exceptional democracy' in 1989.

²⁰ The vanguard of this tendency arguably was and has been *Primero Justicia* (Justice First, PJ for its initials in Spanish), which trades places with *Un Nuevo Tiempo* (A New Era, UNT for its initials in Spanish) for the place of vanguard in the political opposition to the Bolivarian Revolution. By the 2012 presidential elections one of the party's rising stars, Henrique Capriles Radonski, represented the unified opposition in the campaign against Chávez.

the poor – identified with the party *and the man*²¹ in power while those Venezuelans who benefited from the economic and political order of the Fourth Republic became more and more deeply entrenched in their often visceral hatred of the government and its supporters. As a result, by the time of Chávez’s landslide re-election in 2006, the battle lines had clearly been drawn: the middle and upper classes would never vote for Chávez, would never support ‘el proceso’ in anything other than what can only be described in terms of opportunistic bad faith; the poor were solidly in the *chavista* camp.

Or were they, and *are* they? How far does the ‘Chavista camp’ extend? How solid are the bonds between the leader and the rank-and-file? Is the much-touted ‘bond’ between Chávez and his supporters fungible – that is, are there limits to the extent to which *Chavistas* will follow the orders of ‘el Comandante’?

Evidence from elections and my own interviews with community organizers and rank-and-file *chavistas* suggest that Chávez’s electorate is by no means the passive instrument that analytical models of populism imply, nor do candidates fare better electorally solely based on their proximity to the President. Two examples from

²¹ This will become important in what follows. At present, I would simply like to flag the fact that, despite the fact that even though the figure and person of Hugo Chávez and the constituency and force of the Bolivarian Revolution are by no means reducible to one another, there remains a hard-and-fast sympathy *at a popular level* with Chávez that does not extend to other ostensibly ‘chavista’ politicians. One *chavista* friend described this distrust of politicians that seemed incapable of applying to the president himself in terms of the ‘Stockholm Syndrome’ in which hostages start to identify with their captors. In other words, there remains a widespread popular faith in Chávez even as popular discontent deepens vis-à-vis the bureaucrats and technocrats of the state apparatus. “Chávez is surrounded by scorpions,” is a common lament.

Venezuela illustrate this political reality, the analytical implications of which are of central importance for this dissertation and will be explored more fully in the following section of this introduction. The first instance of a potentially fragmented *Chavismo* was seen in the 2007 Constitutional Reform. The failed *reforma* would have extended social security protection to workers in the informal sector, incorporated the *misiones* into the structure of the state, set the official working day at 6 hours, and most importantly established a legal basis for communal and collective property.²²

In the aftermath of the *reforma*'s narrow defeat it could be suggested that the 'Sí' campaign had not so much *been defeated* as much as it had *lost*. The defeat came *not* because of a massive voter revolt against the government. Opposition voters turned out in roughly the same numbers as they had in the 2006 presidential elections. In both cases, between four and four and a half million Venezuelans voted against the *Chavista* option. The deciding difference, then, was the fact that whereas in 2006 over 7.3 million voters turned out to elect Chávez, in the 2007 referendum 3 million of those potential pro-government voters stayed home. Regardless of the 'objective' benefit the *reforma* might have provided the majority of Venezuelans, the manner in

²² The 'No' campaign focused on this final amendment as well as the measure doing away with term limits in order to galvanize middle-class turnout, painting each measure as key steps along the royal road to imposition of 'Castro Communism' in Venezuela. Critics on of the government on the left, however, point to the fact that private property was never even close to threatened, a fact for which the national Chamber of Commerce FEDECAMERAS thanked then-Vice President Jorge Rodríguez (Chirino & Gilman, 2007). Indeed, when Chávez passed 26 of the failed referendum's amendments by decree the following summer (July of 2008), the government published a pamphlet that attempted to counter the 'No' campaign's red-baiting, underlining the benefits of the laws in terms of opportunities generated for small businesses and entrepreneurs (Información, 2008).

which it was packaged and sold to them – from above and by fiat rather than contentious and democratic debate – failed to inspire their support, giving the lie to the notion of a passive and uniform Bolivarian bloc and undermining the internal cohesion of the category ‘*chavista*’ (Lander 2008).

If the defeat of the *reforma* can be attributed to *chavista* abstention, the second example more clearly illustrates the degree to which forces aligned with the government retain a high degree of autonomy. In the 2008 regional elections, voters rejected unpopular PSUV candidates such as Diosdado Cabello and Jesse Chacón, gubernatorial candidate for the state of Miranda (which includes the massive east-Caracas barrio Petare) and mayoral candidate for the Caracas municipality of Sucre (which is situated in Miranda state), respectively.²³ Leftwing activists I interviewed described both Cabello and Chacón as prime examples of the ‘derecho endógeno’ or internal right wing of Chavismo. These elements are seen to be too bureaucratic, not sufficiently radical, corrupt, or otherwise out of sync with the rank-and-file but still powerful within the Bolivarian process. As a result, they were unable to win their races despite the full-court push of the PSUV that included youth-oriented get-out-the-vote events such as a free concert featuring international artists sympathetic to the Bolivarian Revolution such as Spain’s Ska-P, Mexico’s Molotov, and Jamaica’s Ziggy Marley. In the end, however, neither candidate inspired much in the way of votes. Cabello lost by roughly seven percentage points, Chacón by twelve.

²³ Cabello and Chacón were also participants – along with Chávez – in the attempted MBR-200 coup in 1992

The examples of the Cabello and Chacón campaigns illustrate the most important of three scenarios in which PSUV candidates lost in the 2008 regional elections for the purposes of this dissertation. The first and easiest to explain scenario is exemplified by the states of Zulia and Nueva Esparta. These states, for different economic and cultural reasons the present space does not allow to address in depth, have been solidly in the opposition camp since the first days of the Chávez presidency.²⁴ The second scenario, common in more economically developed, urbanized states, is one where the contest was always going to be close. In these races, the ‘*ni-ni*’ vote was calculated to be the decisive factor.²⁵ However, the election in the state of Carabobo and the loss of Mario Silva, the firebrand host of the popular *Chavista* television talk show ‘La Hojilla’ (the razorblade), proves how dangerous catering to the undecided can be in the Venezuelan context.

Silva’s electoral aspirations and revolutionary credibility were significantly damaged for radical rank-and-file voters I interviewed in the lead up to the election when he publicly denounced radical *chavistas* who allegedly carried out direct action attacks against FEDECÁMERAS and other opposition strongholds in early 2008.

Many *chavistas* with whom I spoke expressed displeasure at the ‘political game’ being

²⁴ Nueva Esparta is a state in which tourism and fishing dollars have a virtual lock on political representation. These interests have been resolutely against Chávez as a ‘destabilizing’ force as well as for his government’s privileging of local artisanal fisherpersons over commercial concerns. Zulia, the center of the Venezuelan oil industry, has long-held separatist aspirations and one of the highest rates of income inequality in the country. When Chávez sacked 18,000 white-collar oil sector workers who supported the 2003 bosses’ lockout of the industry, a majority of the firings impacted Zulia.

²⁵ The neologism ‘*ni-ni*’ as a political referent in Venezuela refers to the increasingly slim demographic of those who support ‘neither’ the government ‘nor’ the opposition.

played, and saw Silva's denunciations as being calculated to warm middle class and 'ni-ni' voters to his candidacy. In the end, the gesture only served to alienate what was previously considered to be an unshakable base of support. This sentiment has been recorded in radical literature on Venezuela and was echoed numerous times in the course of interviews with rank-and-file *chavistas*. Many on the left in Venezuela expressed frustration when their ostensible representatives water-down their politics or make what are seen as too many concessions to the rich and the right in the interest of moderation and more 'inclusive' politics (see, for example Bruce 2009; Ciccariello-Maher forthcoming; Martinez, M. Fox, and Farrell 2010). That is to say, for a large number of Chávez supporters, the most significant problem with the Bolivarian Revolution is that it has yet to break with the norms of contemporary liberal democracy. Allowing for the fact that the electoral struggle is one of many – and not the most important one, at that – many rank-and-file *chavistas* are tired of the campaigns, compromises, and posturing of elected officials. As one interviewee put it, rallies, elections, and marches are important as a show of force, and serve as vital reminders of power, but as a colleague from *misión ríbas* put it, “the politics we need happens before and after” such spectacles. In the end, Silva lost to the center-right candidate, Henrique Salas Feo by a nearly 3.5% margin.

If the first scenario is underpinned by the political geography of Venezuela and the second at least implicitly by a rank-and-file rejection of 'politics as usual,' the third concerns antagonisms within *chavismo* and the PSUV around the *derecho endógeno*, as in the cases of Cabello and Chacón. In these races, the *Chavista* vote failed to

materialize for candidates who were perceived to be in favor of slowing down the pace of social transformation in Venezuela. Lack of enthusiasm at the base proved fatal for the PSUV candidates in races for offices where the population also included substantial enclaves of opposition supporters, as in the case of the races for Miranda, the municipality of Sucre, and the Alcaldía Mayor of Caracas.²⁶

Much as in the case of the failed constitutional reform of 2007, these losses seem to have hinged on the inability of the PSUV to mobilize numbers on a scale comparable to the presidential race of 2006. This is not to suggest that the PSUV is somehow entitled to victory; no party or candidate ‘owns’ anyone’s political allegiances. Rather, this detour into electoral contests illustrates that the Bolivarian Revolution cannot be represented as a monolithic phenomenon. Nor is it a unified front, even at the level of its own discourse that relies so heavily on procedural democracy and elections. The government, in other words, can only win elections to the extent that it fields candidates that represent the desires of its base and establishes policies that reflect their demands after the messy process of open and direct consultation (E. Lander 2007, 2008). In this, Venezuela has offered an important counterfactual to the characterization of ours as a ‘post-political’ age dominated by

²⁶ In this final race, Aristobúlo Istúriz, a popular and perennial figure of the Venezuelan left, lost out to Antonio Ledezma. Both men previously held the office in one form or another, from 1992-1996 and 1996-2000, respectively. While Istúriz remains an influential figure in the directorate of the PSUV, it was widely speculated after the vote tally went against him that his popularity was not enough to overcome the bad taste left in the mouth of *caraqueños* by the previous dismal *chavista* administration of Juan Barreto.

cynicism and apathy amongst the population and technocratic manipulation and United States-style campaigns.

While the analysis of election results such as these are important in any summary account of the Bolivarian Revolution and crucial for assessing the divisions within *chavismo*, this is not that sort of dissertation. Nor is this a dissertation that looks to provide ethnographic authenticity to the growing body of literature on contemporary Venezuela. If I am spending so much time on poll numbers, percentages, and vote-analysis in this introduction, it is only to set the stage for a deeper analysis of the social forces at play in Venezuela today by charting one, *and only one of many*, of their manifestations. It is to this analysis that I now turn.

III. The State, Constituted, and Constituent Power in Venezuela

I travelled to Venezuela in early 2007 to examine the role of the state in struggles for social and political justice since the election of Hugo Chávez in 1998. Significant parts of my generation of left-oriented scholarship and activism had previously rejected the notion that the state might be a viable tool for pursuing social change. In the context of the anti or 'alter-globalization' movements of the 1990s, the state was seen by many to be as much the enemy as were the multinational corporations they were seen to serve (see, for example Hardt and Negri 2000; and Holloway 2002 for perhaps the most characteristic theorizations of anti-statist tendencies in the 'alter-globalization' movements). The state was seen as too rigid, too *disciplinary*, too rationalized, and too repressive to ever offer anything other than disaster. What is more, the state-form was recognized as having been all but

completely captured by the by the privatizing interests of the ‘Washington Consensus.’ As James C. Scott (1998) suggests, the modern state operates by making nature and people *legible* to its institutional logics. It forces the world to adapt to its logic, rather than the reverse. That is, the state requires operations that “arrange the population in ways that simplif[y] the classic state functions of taxation, conscription, and prevention of rebellion” (2). These attempts at making-legible resulted in the production of “abridged maps,” that were “not just maps. Rather, they were maps that, when allied with state power, would enable much of the reality they depicted to be remade” (3). The results of this “administrative ordering of nature and society” (4), Scott asserts, have been nothing short of some of the modern era’s most often-cited human tragedies: Stalin’s forced collectivization, Mao’s Great Leap Forward, the ‘green revolution’ in industrialized and capital-intensive agriculture. However, rather than laying the blame for these calamities on the individuals involved, Scott argues that the now-familiar disasters of

state-initiated social engineering originate in a pernicious combination of...the administrative ordering of nature and society...high-modernist ideology...an authoritarian state that is willing and able to bring these high-modernist designs into being...[and a] prostrate civil society that lacks the capacity to resist these plans (4-5).

In other words, while Scott is arguing at least in part for a conjunctural reading of planning, modernity, and disaster, the modern state nonetheless remains the central axis through which tragedy on a mass scale becomes increasingly likely. Guided by a developmentalist vision of the world as raw material to manmade progress, state

intervention was from this perspective always going to be a violent imposition upon – rather than an endogenous development from – a given locality.

During this moment scholars and activists working in and around postcolonial theory developed a critique of the modern nation state couched in a larger project of exposing and countering the lingering effects of empires now ostensibly passed. This project often focused on the consequences of a Eurocentric epistemology and the inevitably subordinate role in which the non-European subject and experience will be placed in a sociopolitical imaginary dominated by western modernity. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), for example, calls for European categories such as the citizen, civil society, and the state to be “provincialized,” in order to break through colonial binaries and teleologies whereby the entire world is considered as ‘becoming-Europe.’ Chakrabarty instead calls for an academic and political practice that approaches these sites as scenes of conflict, wrought with tensions as the imperial flattening of “themes of citizenship and the nation-state [that] dominate our narratives of historical transitions” (46) encounter resistance. To ‘provincialize Europe’ is in other words at least in part a project that de-centers the position of the modern nation state in our political imaginaries.

In a similar vein, many scholars in Latin American Studies have argued for a need to ‘shift the geography of reason’ through an examination of the ‘coloniality of power.’ According to this still-growing body of scholarship and activism, Europe has maintained its dominant position in the world despite the decolonization struggles of the early 19th and mid-20th centuries through a much more long lasting “colonization

of the imaginary [that] accompanied [the] massive and gigantic extermination of the natives” (Quijano 2007, 169).²⁷ As such, the group demands that any consideration of modernity be coupled with the colonial enterprise that made it possible. The project of the coloniality/modernity group of scholarship undermines the naturalization of the modern nation-state and its attendant subject positions and expectations, including and especially cases where the state-form is explicitly at odds with other – indigenous and hybrid – ways of being-in-the-world.

In another challenge to the state-centric imaginary of social-science and activist engagements with the present, Nestór García-Canclini (1995) argues that the lived experience of citizenship, economic globalization, transnationalism, consumer culture, and the aestheticization of politics have all rendered productive fictions like the citizen to be increasingly anachronistic. At an extreme, for García-Canclini, changes in global and local civic and social cultures have exposed the extent to which any notion that the modern republican citizen ever anchored the identity of subjects could have only ever been a fanciful simulacra imported from Europe. Departing from juridical conceptualizations of membership and participation in political communities, García-Canclini argues for a “cultural citizenship” in which what and how we consume has as much to do with ‘who we are’ as do the traditional rights and responsibilities of republican citizenship (21).

In other words, the modern European nation-state is but one of any number of institutional designs, the result of conjunctures, and hence always already a

²⁷ For more on the coloniality of power and representative works of scholars working in this vein, see the edited volume by Moraña, Dussel, and Jáuregui (2008).

multiple and contingent formation (Foucault 2009). Scholarship and activism in the post-Cold War era, perhaps especially in the formerly colonized world, questioned the naturalness and desirability of the forms of state power most familiar to us today. We have come to recognize the modern state formation as an institution that was imposed from abroad. Thus ostensibly neutral or even banal categories such as ‘citizen’ can be seen for the powerful subject-producing and socially divisive technologies of domination that they are (G. Williams 2002). While links between the scholarly critique of the coloniality of power and the anti- or alter-globalization movements were not always direct or manifest, my suggestion here is that they share epistemological and ethical common grounds that can, perhaps paradoxically, be appreciated as Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution conditions of possibility. Modern, individually oriented, and inwardly looking Eurocentric notions of state and citizen had to be erased so that new forms of collective identity and responsibility could emerge.

In similar fashion, the general critique of the state-form that animated much post-Cold War anti-capitalist and ‘alter-globalization’ movements was often also based as much on a rejection of the ‘actually existing’ socialisms of the Soviet bloc and the failures of national liberation movements as they were on an antagonism to the liberal representative democracies of the late twentieth century. I would suggest, however, that this *descriptive* and analytical task on the part of observers and theorists quite often was endowed with a *normative* investment that often paralleled, if unwittingly, the very anti-welfare-statist logic of the neoliberals the left was ostensibly

battling.²⁸ As such, in the place of the parties, armies, and fronts of the early twentieth century's revolutionary and anticolonial politics – the examples of Mexico in 1910, Russia in 1917, China in 1949, Algeria in 1954, Cuba in 1959 – by the late 1990s we worked instead to build a 'network of 'networks' (see for example Melucci 1996) or a 'Movement of Movements' (Fisher and Ponniah 2003). Anything smelling of the state, or even of the protostate, was often derided or avoided. Theorizations and experimentations with new forms of praxis in the 1990s emphasized autonomy and dispersal, conjunctural coordination and a creative expansion of identities and intensities rather than militant and political (that is, state-oriented) antagonisms.²⁹ In the place of party platforms and 12-point programs, we held summits organized around the open-to-interpretation slogan 'another world is possible' (Hammond 2003). In sum, especially throughout the 1990s and into the first years of the twenty-first century, there was an emerging consensus among the *radical* left that the state in either its neoliberal or socialist variants was a road best left untraveled.

²⁸ James Petras (1997) shares this concern. Petras argues that the over-emphasis on civil society and the dominance of Non-Governmental Organizations among social movements in Latin America during this era as amounts to nothing less than the "community face of Neoliberalism."

²⁹ The list of authors and specific ideas within this tendency is far too vast to do service to in a footnote or an introductory chapter. At present, it will have to suffice to point to a few keystones in this line of analysis: of particular interest to this dissertation is the work of Félix Guattari's (2008) work on the Brazilian Workers' Party in the 1980s; Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's (1985) work on post-Marxist political theory and radical democracy; Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri (2000, 2005, 2009) and Paolo Virno's (2004) work on 'the multitude'; and, though from a decidedly different perspective, Enrique Dussel's (2006) conceptualization of 'el pueblo.' For a treatment of the internal limits and contradictions of these sorts of approaches to politics and subjectivity, see especially Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek (2000).

Thus when Hugo Chávez announced in 2005 that Venezuela was in the process of building a ‘socialism for the twenty-first century,’ and previously, when he and other officials in the government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela³⁰ started quoting Mao Tse-Tung on the role of the military in revolutionary society (‘...like a fish in water...’), many analysts and activists were skeptical. There were and remain concerns linking any military involvement in politics with dictatorship and human rights abuses, concerns that have dominated studies of Latin American politics and society since the 1980s (see, for example, Castillo 2001; this concern can also be seen in other, ostensibly unrelated areas of Latin American Studies, such as the literature on “presidentialism” and institutional design. See, for example, Valenzuela 2004). Anxieties about any potential return to authoritarian military rule – leaving aside for the moment the President’s style, proclivity towards issuing orders rather than taking advice, and tendency to favor plebiscite over direct participation and messy, open-ended debate – have thus far proved unfounded. What has instead occurred in Venezuela since 1998, and which has to varying degrees spread throughout the continent, has been a rhetorical rejection of neoliberal state models in favor of a renewed belief that governments have an obligation to provide for the

³⁰ The official name of Venezuela had been changed to ‘The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela’ with the approval by plebiscite of a new constitution in 1999. The project of ‘21st century’ or ‘Bolivarian’ Socialism was announced by Chávez at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2005.

welfare of their citizens and intervene in the trajectories of their lives.³¹ The state has, in other words, come to be seen by many in Venezuela as a benevolent force.

Regardless of the analytical ‘spin’ of a given argument, Venezuelan politics in the 21st century at the very least illustrates that the 1990s’ obituaries of the sovereign nation-state were written prematurely. Arguments that states would be replaced by regional blocs, megacities, or transnational migratory networks (Archibugi 2003; Hardt and Negri 2000; Sassen 2002) seem to have similarly overstated the case. Despite the rather unintended correspondence among the left and the right on the question of the state that emerged in the 1990s, the Bolivarian Revolution has insisted on the importance and the potential utility of state power (see, for example Benjamín Arditi 2008). Thus, one of the main targets of research for this dissertation was to determine the degree to which this ostensible ‘return’ of the state was presaged by the specific configurations of the Venezuelan state-form in its colonial, post-colonial, and twentieth century histories. I wanted to examine just how deep the state was rooted in

³¹ The 1999 Bolivarian Constitution, for example, enumerated a number of substantial social rights such as provision of education, health care, and housing as the responsibility of the Venezuelan government. While the 1999 constitution did not specify mechanisms in these cases, the move away from the stripped-down post-IMF state apparatus is quite marked. Most commentators in the ‘mainstream’ of social science and government opinion have held such a move to be potentially dangerous populist demagoguery, out of sync with what they held to be the ‘democratizing’ trends in the region throughout the 1990s (Castañeda 2006; Corrales and Penfold-Becerra 2007; Kirk Hawkins and Hansen 2006; Kozak Rovero 2008; K. M. Roberts 2003). At an extreme, some commentators in Venezuela and elsewhere have depicted the return to state-led development as an imposition of ‘Castro Communism’ on the oil-rich country and a dangerous harbinger of one-man totalitarian rule (see, for example Petkoff 2008; see also the former www.salon.com blogger Miguel Octavio’s www.devilsexcrement.com).

the Venezuelan political imaginary, and how its role has been redefined and reproduced among supporters and opponents of the Bolivarian Revolution. I was then to extend this line of inquiry, to outline the positive and precautionary lessons this reborn statism in Venezuela offered for progressive activist projects throughout the region and the world.

As is usually the case, however, this initial problematic shifted in the course of my research. As I became more involved in Venezuelan politics, my focus increasingly shifted to the question of the constitution of antagonistic individual and collective bodies, including those that make up the state as we know it. While the particularity of the state-form continues to animate this dissertation, I increasingly see the state as one of many terrains on which social antagonisms develop. In other words, while I consider the state to be a crucial manifestation of constituted power, my aim in this dissertation is to treat it and analyze and to avoid naturalizing its present form or apologizing for past and future moments. My focus shifted from a study of changes in state power to a study of the social forces that, in the Venezuelan case animate, challenge, and reimagine state power, even if doing so unintentionally.

I came to the language of ‘social forces’ rather than the perhaps more familiar ‘social movements’ after much consideration. Social movements are central to the past and present of the Bolivarian Revolution, and many will be considered in the course of this dissertation. However, I also maintain that ‘movements’ are the surfacing of deeper social logics, antagonisms, and processes – forces that both are and are not visible like marching, protesting, and lobbying yet are strikingly present

nonetheless. By emphasizing *forces* rather than *movements* I am attempting two maneuvers. The first acknowledges the psychoanalytic truth that ‘we know ourselves the least,’ and hence must dig deeper than symptoms and manifest contents alone if we are to grasp the heart of a given political sequence. Secondly, the language of *forces* allows for a much wider scope of analysis, looking not only to the ‘political actors’ conventionally understood, but also to structural facts such as the informal sector of the economy and the growing precarious urban population as well as historical tendencies and habits that shape the terrain of the politically possible. By developing the language of social forces rather than movements I am, in other words, attempting a non-humanist mode of political analysis and one that sidesteps reified topological distinctions such as ‘*the* political.’

While this dissertation in many ways retains my initial interest in the development of the Venezuelan state as institution, as social relation, and as a form of thought across the transition from the ‘Fourth’ to the ‘Fifth’ Republic,³² these pursuits have taken something of a back seat to a more theoretically-focused analysis of revolutionary and conservative social forces. The primary focus of this dissertation is thus not the institutional changes of the Venezuelan state but rather the reflexive relationship between these structural factors and political subjectivities that have become increasingly influential in the aftermath of neoliberal restructuring. Too

³² In Venezuela, the Fourth Republic refers to the institutional era that predates the rewriting and approval of the new constitution in 1999. The Fourth Republic, however, is also an always-present discursive artifact among supporters of the current government, who often deploy ‘Fourth Republic’ as an adjective to denote poor planning, corruption, and a more general lack of socially oriented values.

many theorizations by the post-Cold War left have approached these elements – the subjective power of non-state and anti-systemic social forces and the institutionalized and conserving forces of order and stability – as if they were not dialectically fused. My contention is that they both *are*, and that these opposing expressions of political power only *necessarily* are fused within the liberal tradition. This dissertation tracks both the ways in which these powers remain linked as well as those in which the tension can no longer be contained – when individual and collective subjectivities and antagonisms become multitudinous.

IV. On the Antinomies of Power

If the unifying thread to my interest in the Venezuelan state begins with the experimentation that the institutional assemblage of structures and positions have been undergoing since the election of Chávez in 1998, it quickly moves to an understanding of the Venezuelan state as a social relation. This approach sees the state not merely as a bureaucratic-administrative-ideological-repressive apparatus but rather as a contradictory totality animated by the dialectic of constituent and constituted power. Perhaps more appropriately, if pointedly, this second analytical lens through which to examine the current Venezuelan scene is interested primarily in questions of class antagonism.

Antonio Negri (1999), working through the history of European revolutions and republican thought since Machiavelli, describes constituent power as resistance and constitution counterposed to the codifying, regimenting, and extractive power of constituted power. Constituent power is an activity, linked with living labor and is

experienced in cooperation and an incessant movement towards equality and liberation from constraint. Constituent power thus resists any form of artificial separation, especially in the Marxian tradition of any sort of division between the social, the economic, and the political – partitions that serve to justify subordination and exploitation, especially under conditions of fully-developed capitalism. It is both creative and destructive. It is always unsettled, always in motion and contingent. Constituent power is the messy – and for some, beautiful – force of substantive democracy and equality. At its core constituent power resists all limitations; this, I will argue, is at one and the same time its greatest virtue and danger.

Against this ‘constituent power’ stands ‘constituted power,’ or the institutionalized forms – states, assemblies, cities, and governments – of organization and rationalization. This second form of power has been described in terms of a ‘power over’ and as an inherently alien and inauthentic force vis-à-vis its other (Holloway 2002). Constituted power is instrumental and hierarchical; it is both institution forming and institution sustaining. It is inward looking and operates according to a self-serving rationality. Constituted power need not be diabolical in its relation to constituent power, however, and is not always theorized in Manichean terms. Despite its limitations, some argue a legitimate constituted power can have a happy correspondence of functions with a healthy and active constituent power. Indeed, ‘the forces of order’ that seek to shore up progressive gains in a given revolutionary sequence rather than risk over-extension can come from a place of sincere fidelity to what they view as the ‘true intentions’ at the core of a given

movement. At its most extreme, constituted power ruthlessly suppresses any actual or perceived threat to the present, as in the case of the ‘Dirty War Against Subversion’ in which military governments throughout Latin America couched their rule in discourses of family and civilization and virtually exterminated an entire generation of activists, academics, artists, and other outsiders.

While some make the case that constituent power is capable of existing without constituted power, I argue the reverse does not hold. Without even the minimal expression of constituent power in the form of a passive consent, constituted power would be little more than empty buildings and meaningless words on reams of unread paper. Without a constituent element, constituted power is impotent, pointless. This dissertation examines moments of rupture, the inculcation of habit, and the reproduction of social bodies to ask if the Bolivarian Revolution has altered the relation between constituent and constituted power from the vampiric one of the liberal tradition to the more symbiotic and reflexive one to which it (officially) aspires. The question this dissertation poses in the context of the Bolivarian Revolution is whether this relation between the two forms of political power is vampiric or symbiotic. That is to say, does constituted power feed from and drain constituent power? Or do the two work together in something of a tandem manner? It will be my contention that both approaches describe this relation, and that for the moment therein resides a productive tension or dialectic that is at least in part shaped by the persistence of the state as a form or terrain of thought. Put somewhat differently, and in order to amend the analyses of Negri and others vis-à-vis the tension between

constituent and constituted power, the state remains the background of any attempt to think future modalities of collective life. It is the negative horizon against which resistance and ‘the new’ are inevitably theorized.

In this dissertation, I approach the state as a relation between constituent and constituted power as well as its own transformation by examining a few key moments and discourses that run throughout twentieth and twenty-first century Venezuelan history and the way in which they have either been inscribed within or disavowed by the Bolivarian Revolution. In many ways, my intent in this regard was to extend the crucial analysis made by Fernando Coronil (1997) in *The Magical State*. In the book, Coronil outlines the tandem and tangled development of the Venezuelan state and oil industry in the course of the twentieth century, casting each other as possessing the demiurgic capacity to transform nature – in the form of oil – into the physical trappings of an Eurocentrically conceived modernity. The results, in Coronil’s estimation, ranged from the farcical to the tragic: empty and productionless factories, monuments perched on mountains boasting the mastery of nature, import culture, political intrigue, military crackdowns, and the ‘slumification’ of Venezuela’s cities.

I envisioned, then, a consideration of how the state has shaped the bounds of political possibility in Venezuela. Extending from Coronil, my research centered on a few different – distinct though by no means mutually exclusive – functions of the state throughout Venezuela’s history as an independent nation-state. The original Bolivarian vision of the state in the nineteenth century placed it in the role of educator and instrument for the transformation of colonial subjects into modern citizens (Rojas

2008; Ureña Cervera 2007). By the mid-nineteenth century, it was without the robust sovereignty associated with modern international relations and reduced to the status of one actor among many – and often not the strongest one, at that – in a battle with regional strongmen, *hacendados*, and *caudillos* (Lynch 1992, 2006). In the twentieth century, the state served twin roles as landlord and magician, acting as go-between for foreign oil companies and the oil beneath the surface. The riches that flowed into the country after the sale of the subsoil were then transformed into the physical trappings of progress and development (Coronil 1997; Karl 1997; Tinker Salas 2009). By the last two decades of the twentieth century the state’s largesse, and hence its mystique and capacity was interrupted during the region-wide ‘lost decades’ of financial crisis, neoliberal structural adjustment, popular revolt, and government crackdown.

Today, in the ‘Bolivarian’ and revolutionary phases of Venezuela’s Fifth Republic, the state has returned to something of the educator’s role, and herein lies a core problematic of this dissertation. While the Bolivarian Revolution claims at a discursive level to be the realization and embodiment of a history of disruptions and breaks that runs from pre-independence to the present – in terms that emphasize its grassroots, bottom-up legitimacy, its embodiment of constituent power – much of its actual practice has been of a top-down and institutional nature. That is, rather than following the Zapatista mandate to “mandar obediciendo” (to rule by obeying), the Bolivarian Revolution can be seen as either creating facts on the ground – institutional changes to which Venezuelans are expected to adapt and carry forward – or, perhaps better, as creating institutional windows and spaces in which organized

social forces can semi-autonomously create their own answers to the questions of what ‘socialism for the 21st century’ might resemble. In either case, there is a gap between the government and the social forces of which it claims to be an extension.

I describe this gap in terms of the creative tension between constituent and constituted power and I argue that this gap has different functions, potentials, and limitations in the aftermath of neoliberal restructuring. While these categories remain central to understanding the politics of contemporary Venezuela, I also argue that in many ways the antinomy they form must be seen as specific to modern liberalism. Better, I argue that the way we deploy notions of constituent and constituted power all too often fail to escape the shadow of liberal social contract theory. This dissertation contends that depictions of politics as exchange and of rule founded in consent do not accurately reflect power relations in Venezuela (or anywhere else, for that matter). I instead develop an analysis centering on the production of individual and collective subjectivities through political economic and discursive means. The dissertation is thus guided by a Marxist attention to the structures of political economy as well as cultural modes of analysis on the formation of revolutionary social blocs in the present.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One

Between Multitude and Pueblo: Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution and the Government of Ungovernability

The first chapter contends that how we understand and identify, celebrate, or rationalize constituent power determines the shape of politics. I focus on three attempts by the Bolivarian Revolution to discursively identify itself with autonomous social rebellions outside of its direct control: 1989's *caracazo* anti-neoliberal uprising, 2002's counter-coup that returned Hugo Chávez to power, and the 2003 overturning of a bosses' strike in the national petroleum industry. This results in a paradox, however, in that in these moments the government is tacitly if selectively sanctioning the violent overthrow of a constituted power in order to claim legitimacy for itself, what I describe as an attempt to forge a government of ungovernability. The chapter outlines the relation between constituent (rebellious and democratic) and constituted (institutionalized and mediating) power as theorized in the Marxist and Latin American Philosophical traditions in the context of the Bolivarian Revolution. I suggest, against this often-polarizing debate, that contemporary Venezuela offers a chance to think social subjectivity in a matter distinct from the domesticated and authentic pueblo or the excessive and rebellious multitude.

Chapter Two

The Problem with Populism: Development, Coloniality, and Anxiety

Much writing about contemporary Venezuela dismisses the Bolivarian Revolution as one of the latest iterations in a long line of Latin American populisms. In this chapter I argue that discourses *about* populism can be linked to Eurocentric and developmentalist narratives that contribute to what I describe as a ‘global division of legitimacy.’ This notional division groups the world into ‘normal’ regimes and those that require surveillance, intervention, and correction. I use the work of the modernity/coloniality group of Latin American and Latin Americanist critical theorists to register how populism can serve as a civilizational discourse, and how this discourse in turn betrays an anxiety about social change, instability, and mass involvement in politics. At the same time, however, I raise concern with the corresponding tendency by many on the left, including some in the modernity/coloniality group, to reactively valorize excluded elements of a given social order. All too often this move only inverts a hierarchy, maintaining the structure while rearranging subject positions that were originally created by the previously dominant discourse. What is truly novel about the Bolivarian Revolution for political theory and praxis, I conclude, is the extent to which subjects have broken from inherited configurations of the political and have been willing to experiment with forms of organization that cannot be reduced to populism. I conclude that they point instead to more reflexive, contingent, and protagonistic political communities.

Chapter Three

The Power of the Many: Populism, The Multitude, and the Bolivarian Process

If the second chapter critiqued discourses *about* populism that are fearful of its breaks with liberal democracy, the third chapter critiques theoretical accounts that praise populism for this departure and consider it synonymous with radical democracy. Here I am particularly concerned with the recent work of Ernesto Laclau, who shares this dissertation's ethical investment with liberatory and participatory democracy. However, against Laclau's signifying chain that links populism to hegemony, radical democracy, and more egalitarian forms of collective life, I argue that Laclau's conceptualization of populism perhaps unwittingly reproduces contractual and representative elements of liberalism. Through an in-depth analysis of Laclau's deployments of semiotics, psychoanalysis, and Gramscian hegemony theory, I conclude that populism as a concept obscures more than it illuminates, especially at the level of subject production and social reproduction. These potential blindspots distract from the ways in which phenomena labeled populism by the ostensible left can also serve to contain, rationalize, and direct social powers while fixing political identity and ultimately, stifling change.

Chapter Four

The Discursive Production of a Revolution: Myth and the Bolivarian Revolution

Chapter four examines the role of myth in the Bourdieuan *habitus* (the 'structuring structure' necessary for the reproduction and variation of social forms and subjects) of postneoliberal Bolivarian Venezuela. I examine theoretical debates on myth – notably

from the French and Peruvian Marxist traditions – in order to update understandings of the role of myth in the process of social transformation. Rather than dismissing myth as ‘false consciousness,’ I contend that the way in which Bolivarian discourse incorporates and recodes historically familiar symbols – Simón Bolívar, oil, and the central state – illustrates a highly nuanced ideological strategy that is attempting to reconfigure the very *habitus* of Venezuela. However, I argue that contemporary attempts to characterize this process fail in that they tend to either accept this discourse on its own terms or to dismiss it outright. Rather than these opposed extremes, I contend that the proliferation of meanings and the affective drives – that result from, for example, resuscitating the idea of socialism – take on a life of their own. I suggest, in other words, that myths can become multitudinous, rendering them less apparatuses of capture in that they quickly take on lives of their own.

Chapter Five

...After Neoliberalism?

Chapter five begins by considering the Bolivarian Revolution’s steps away from the neoliberal restructuring of the 1980s and 1990s in order to better articulate the ideological, economic, and political structures of contemporary Bolivarianismo and its ‘socialism for the twenty first century.’ I argue that the Bolivarian Revolution is better understood as part of a constellation of postliberal democracies in which socialism is one discourse among many rather than the chief defining ideological influence. While much literature on postliberal (or ‘hybrid’) regimes considers them to elements of authoritarian retrenchment, I argue contemporary Venezuelan politics cannot be

understood outside of an analysis of the impacts of neoliberal structural adjustment. As a result, the aftermath of (neo)liberalism can potentially be seen in a more optimistic, if still contingent and unstable, light.

Conclusion

Having outlined multiple attempts by the current Venezuelan state to capture or identify itself with the constituent energies of the multitude, I conclude by reflecting on the extent to which my analysis of the Bolivarian Revolution contributes to understanding postliberal regimes more generally. While much of the literature on postliberalism understands every departure from the institutions of modern, representative, and market-friendly democracies to be a step towards authoritarian retrenchment, I conclude by suggesting that even in their failures these projects can offer glimpses of potentially more egalitarian and participatory political communities.

Chapter One

Between Multitude and Pueblo: Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution and the Government of Ungovernability

At a 2009 event commemorating the twentieth anniversary of a series of nation-wide uprisings and subsequent government crackdown known since as the *caracazo* or *sacudón*,³³ Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez argued, “anyone who says the *caracazo* was not a political event is simply wrong...the *caracazo* was not an irrational explosion of the primitive or savage instincts of the masses, nor was it simply the chance for someone to steal a refrigerator.” It was, rather, the moment in which “the pueblo broke its chains” and in a multilayered ideological gesture, Chávez elevated what has often been dismissively described as a ‘riot’ (see, for example, Briceno-Leon 2005; Coppedge 2002; Corrales 2002) to the status of the nation’s patrimony. Interpreting the *caracazo* through the lyrics of the national anthem, Chávez added an explicitly Marxist inflection to both the anthem and the *caracazo*: “The Lord shouted, down

³³ Literally, ‘the explosion in Caracas’ or ‘the great shake-up.’ However, as Jon Beasley Murray (2011) notes, there are a number of other names that have been given to the *caracazo*, including but not limited to ‘the great massacre’ and, understatedly, ‘the events.’ I agree with Beasley Murray’s suggestion that this proliferation of titles illustrates the degree to which the *caracazo* defies signification. I would add, however, that these different modes of signification also tell us much about the position occupied by the speaker both in terms of their opinion on the *caracazo* and, increasingly, on the current shape of politics in Venezuela. Official government figures at the time of the events put the number of dead around three hundred, university researchers and activists have subsequently estimated the number of dead to be closer to three thousand (Coronil and Skurski 2006; López Maya 2005). All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

with tyranny, and the poor from their shanties demanded freedom in the streets.³⁴ [This was] a rebellion of the poor, [this was] class war as Karl Marx would say” (TeleSUR, 2009). Chávez’s comments here betray a potentially clumsy labor in which all democratic and republican regimes must engage; a work that seeks to transform the often chaotically-experienced constituent power of bodies into the consent and obedience of the modern citizen.

The government of Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution presents itself as the product of the *caracazo* and other similar moments of unrest in officially sponsored commemorations, festivals, and publications. Official discourse in Venezuela claims that the election of the Chávez government realizes the latent revolutionary and egalitarian potential of upheavals that punctuated late twentieth and early twenty-first century Venezuelan politics. Most significantly, this discourse draws upon the *caracazo* of 1989, the April 2002 counter-coup, and the breaking of the petroleum industry lockout in 2003 to form a narrative that legitimizes the government of Hugo Chávez. Above and beyond whatever material and political gains the poor majority of Venezuelans have enjoyed under the Chávez government, then, this discourse also confers a historical authority on the Bolivarian Revolution. Within this discourse, the

³⁴ The original lyrics were also charged with revolutionary fervor: “¡Abajo Cadenas! ¡Abajo Cadenas! Gritaba el señor, gritaba el señor, y el pobre en su choza libertad pidió” (Put down your chains...shouted the lord, and the poor in their hut demanded freedom). Another parallel Chávez often cites between the *caracazo* and the independence ideals and battles referenced in the national anthem occurs later in the song, “la América toda existe en Nación; y si el despotismo, levanta la voz, seguid el ejemplo, que Caracas dió” (*All of America is a Nation, and if despotism raises its voice, follow the example of Caracas* [a reference to declaration of independence and the wars against the Spanish Empire in the early 19th century]).

Bolivarian Revolution *subsumes* moments like the *caracazo*. By drawing historical links to the *caracazo*, furthermore, this discourse shifts political time in Venezuela; the 1998 election of Chávez is removed from the normal constitutional cycle of electoral contests, campaigns, and institutional evolution. Rather, this discourse marks the *caracazo* as the year zero of a new era in which the elections of 1998 are the initiation of a new, institutional and governmental phase of a longer-standing historical revolutionary sequence.

This can be seen in many instances of anecdotal as well as official government discourse. In his 2009 commemoration of the *caracazo*, for example, the President positions himself as something of a narrator-in-chief. By interpreting the revolt using the lexicon of the nation's officially sanctioned and ritualized symbolism (the national anthem) Chávez is undertaking the work of reining-in a fundamental refusal of the modern social contract, reading the assertion of a fundamental *ungovernability* in terms of the so-called 'right to revolt' of the modern liberal constitutional tradition. By *ungovernability*, I refer to a situation in which sovereignty breaks down and in which the nation state can no longer contain the energies or command the obedience of its subjects. However, rather than referring to this as a situation in which the state simply 'fails,' I wish here to highlight this breakdown in command and control as a capacity that is always present, that always haunts constituted orders (in which 'governability' ostensibly prevails).³⁵ Modern contractualism attempts to hide this fundamentally

³⁵ It is not only on the constituent-side of the liberal social contract that order collapses. States can and have also initiated or allowed sequences of *ungovernability*, with grisly results. In the case of neoliberal restructuring state capacity is drastically

precarious balance and turns to increasingly violent means to maintain the illusion of timeless stability and strength.

What makes Venezuela's Bolivarian process distinct, I argue in this chapter, is that the government has attempted to *follow* the constituent power of autonomously organized collectivities – of workers demanding control over their factories (Azzellini 2009), of citizens organizing in their communities for access to basic human needs (Fernandes 2007, 2010; Martinez, M. Fox, and Farrell 2010), and as I argue in this chapter, as political agents capable of overturning and reshaping state power. The process has by no means been completed, nor has it been unidirectionally 'progressive.' As I suggest in this chapter, this is both part of the problem with the terminological and ethical plane established by the opposition between constituent and constituted power, or between multitude and pueblo.

We repeatedly see this tension in Chávez's commemoration speech, in which he aligns himself with the disruption of the *caracazo*, rewriting it in terms of a project in which he plays a central role. The *caracazo*, as I argue in this chapter, can by no means be simply or conclusively read in terms of a demand for new or better government. Nor can it or should it be unproblematically assumed to be the first gestures toward the at least semi-Marxian project of building a 'Socialism for the Twenty First Century' without significant reconsideration of what each of these constitutive terms

reduced or redirected, exposing entire segments of the population to precariousness and death. In counter-insurgency the state declares war on the population, or that least part that has become-enemy (see, for an extended and critical discussion of the implications of ungovernability, Fregoso 2006; Mbembe 2003).

signify. Without these critical gestures, there is little other choice but to conclude that the relation of Bolivarian discourse to ungovernability is one of translation through which the *caracazo* becomes something of a civic exercise. The resulting implication is that revolutionary constituent power can thus only be realized in constituted – that is, statist – form.

As the persistence of the theme of the right to revolt suggests, this tension between ungovernable constituent power and government is by no means unique to the Bolivarian Revolution. My interest in this chapter is thus not to subject the Chávez government to some sort of ideology critique – comparing the ‘appearance’ of Bolivarian discourse to the ‘substance’ of its practice and the global historical moment. I am rather interested in the ways in which these discursive and practical tensions might be specific to the liberal tradition. As such, if the Bolivarian Revolution is some how ‘postliberal’ – for better or for worse (on the former, see Benjamín Arditi 2008; from the latter perspective, see Corrales and Penfold 2011) – then a new analysis is called for. By placing the *highly contested and contesting nature* of constituent power at the center of political discourse, this chapter examines the Bolivarian Revolution as an open, postliberal process, avoiding the liberal constitutionalist tendency to relegate moments of constituent power to the exceptional or outside of ostensibly normal politics.

In moments like the 2009 commemoration of the *caracazo*, the government of Hugo Chávez valorizes and claims to embody social forces that have expressed themselves as antithetical to established order. These discourses thus attempt to

dialectically triangulate what is often conceived of as the absolute, irresolvable difference between constituent and constituted power. However, something of a remainder always persists and escapes these attempts to domesticate constituent power. This remainder can be considered, following Sheldon Wolin (2004), as the ‘fugitive’ nature of democracy in that “democracy is an ephemeral phenomenon rather than a settled system” and more provocatively, “the true question is not whether democracy can govern in the traditional sense, but why it would want to” (602). In this chapter I ask how, or if, the Bolivarian Revolution’s discourse vis-à-vis the creative and ethical constituent power of ungovernability point towards new practices of governance and resistance. Are there ways of reading the relation between constituent and constituted power that do not emphasize capture or cynicism? How can we study and (more importantly) work in solidarity with the ‘excessive’ and ‘rebellious’ without forcing uneasy coalitions – with, for example, the anti-Chávez Venezuelan opposition – or limiting ourselves to pious but ultimately empty deconstructionist gestures? How then, can we diagnose the subjective manifestations of an ungovernability that points to forms of democracy that are neither settled nor fugitive, but rather immanent, open, and possible rather than transcendent and exceptional? That is, what is the historical materialism of the possible as it is expressed in Venezuela today?

My approach will follow that of many writing in the Marxist and Spinozist traditions on questions of political authority and social change. I take constituent power to mean the expansive and democratic force of a multitude of singularities

operating in solidarity with one another, most evident in fleeting experiences on a common, immanent plane. Against constituent power, *constituted* power seeks to contain, neutralize, and direct the former's often violent and chaotic creative energy, operating through the limits and hierarchies of institutions. Constituted power is thus expressed through the repetition of procedure and is populated by the stable and bounded bodies of subjects and citizens organized as 'people,' 'nations,' and 'pueblos.' The subjective expression of constituent power on the other hand has more often been described as 'the multitude' and while not eschewing organization, cannot be contained by static, ahistorical, or transcendental formations.

The discourses of the Bolivarian Revolution gesture to an enduring theme in the democratic and republican traditions as much as they do to the specific and local histories in which they are situated. They pose the question of whether or not a practice of constituent power can endure, be made dependable and constant or institutionalized, or if any attempt to solidify and extend explosions of constituent power can only ever result in its neutralization.³⁶ Thus, in addition to the spatial logic of the modern nation state – seen in practices of separation and procedure – the Bolivarian Revolution introduces a temporal rejoinder, or a questioning of how long this government can even ever hope *to be possible*. There is thus more to the question of constituent and constituted power, and of multitudes and pueblos, than choice of vocabulary. As I argue in this chapter, each of these four concepts provide us with

³⁶ On neutralization, see Carl Schmitt's essay "The Age of Neutralization and Depoliticization." Though not explicitly addressed in the essay, I would argue that the genealogy developed by Schmitt could fruitfully be read as a history of anxieties aroused by the power of crowds and multitudes.

distinct and perhaps even competing ways of viewing the social. More importantly, they lend themselves to different political projects. Statist projects throughout the modern era have been based on a projected contractualism that fears the potential of unmediated or non-representative forms of democracy. However, these neutralizations are always incomplete in that something always escapes the encounter of constituted and constituent power. The analytical task of recognizing different forms of social ontology – as in this chapter, differentiating between multitude and pueblo – thus has the concrete effect recognizing the limits and potentials of a given political sequence.

My argument progresses along intersecting historical and theoretical axes. In the following section I more fully elaborate the concepts of constituted and constituent power. I then offer genealogies of the concepts ‘multitude’ and ‘pueblo’ as the theoretical vehicles that best characterize both the limits of the political imaginary of the Bolivarian Revolution and distinct visions for social transformation in Venezuela. The third section is more historical in focus, examining of the Bolivarian Revolution’s claim to be culmination of moments of ungovernability – the *caracazo*, the 2002 counter-coup, and the reopening of the petrol sector in 2003. I then conclude with a theoretical consideration of the gap between multitude and pueblo, and how this gap can contribute to a better understanding not only of constituent, but of constituted power as well. In the end, I find that the binary pairing constituent-constituted power is an artifact of the liberal tradition that assumes and posits a contractual dynamic to politics. The extent that this dynamic continues to define the Bolivarian Revolution in

Venezuela is also the extent to which the process has yet to leave the territory of conventional liberalism.

I. Constituent and Constituted Power: A Summary and Reconsideration

Constituent power is a slogan, a principle, and a paradox. As slogan and principle, constituent power can be detected as the chief value of the battle against monarchy and feudalism. It is a cry for self-determination, an affirmation of popular sovereignty, and a denunciation of arbitrariness and of tyranny. In the modern republican tradition, constituent power is expressed as a democratic principle stating that authority is only legitimate to the extent that it integrates the function of ruling and of being ruled. Liberalism has added to this a contractual element, allowing for consent and transfer to take the place of presence and participation. Without this exchange and social contract, humanity itself would fall into a state of total war and anarchy.

The paradox of constituent power is thus that it alone establishes political legitimacy, but that alone it is impotent at best, dangerous and violent at worst. Constituent power in the liberal tradition must thus always be transferred. *As if it exists only to be alienated.* Yet it persists in reserve to either reinforce or supplant the transcendental authority to which it is always assumed to be tied. For many, constituent power can thus only be seen in its unadulterated and immanent form in the exception – at the birth or death of political orders, when sovereign authority is either established or when it breaks down.

Andreas Kalyvas (2005) offers a historical path to the resolution of this disjuncture between immanence, transcendence, and exception. He argues that although the notion of constituent power predates modern statecraft, it has been particularly central to liberal thought and jurisprudence. As a concept and principle it has thus also gained particular prominence in the post Cold War era, though the hegemonic understanding of constituent power since the fall of the Soviet bloc has been constrained by prevailing forms of neoliberal democracy. I would argue that in this way constituent power has been turned against itself. Whereas constituent power might be considered “the utter limit of any politics, a politics that survives the dissolution of governments, the disruption of legal systems, and the collapse of instituted powers” today it is increasingly used instrumentally to shore up particular forms of constituted power (227).

Kalyvas wants to rescue constituent power’s immanence and indeterminability for the present. However, this combination of legitimacy with immanence is inherently unstable. In the Latin roots of constituent power, ‘to constitute’ requires working together, an act of co-creation carried out by multiple subjects (236). As such, “the founding of a new constitutional order must involve all those who will obey it...the normative content of the constituent sovereign is one of participation. This constituent power demands that *those who are subject to a constitutional order co-institute it*” (emphasis in the original, 238). Constituent power thus lends itself to an open, inclusive, and *participatory* democracy. In other words, for Kalyvas, constituent power is a source of legitimacy only in so far as it consists of a coming together, an act of

creation in which bodies create and consent to the structures they will subsequently be expected to obey. However, much like classical liberal theory naturalized its own subject positions via tropes of a state of nature, this conceptualization of constituent power risks assuming the sorts of civic identities it wants to produce. Kalyvas's account projects contracting bodies capable of the civic calculations necessary for democracy into the original moment of the founding of societies. While it has the benefit of characterizing democracy as an iterated rather than primordial event, this account nonetheless remains within the terrain of exchange, contract, and sovereign subjects insofar as it depicts constituent power in terms of consent to rule.³⁷ In the end, Kalyvas is aware this treatment of constituent power contains it within contractualism and recognizes it only as a principle that negates itself: constituent power is thus the paradoxical core of the liberal state that deploys the absolute power of creation and destruction as a *justification* for constituted power. Constituent power is thus a *structural* paradox that hardwires impossibility and excess into its very fabric.

Antonio Negri (1999) builds on this understanding, arguing that “to acknowledge constituent power as a constitutional and juridical principle, we must see it not simply as producing constitutional norms and structuring constituted powers but primarily as a subject that regulates democratic politics” (1). For Negri constituent power is always experienced in *absolute, ontological, and irreconcilable* difference to

³⁷ Similarly, in the case of Venezuela, Jennifer McCoy (2010) can locate constituent power in the Bolivarian Revolution only in the ratification of the 1999 constitution and the absenteeism of the 2007 referendum (84).

constituted power.³⁸ It regulates democratic politics by challenging it, by exposing the lies of its founding.

For Negri, constituent power is experienced in its absolute, ontological, and irreconcilable difference to constituted power. It ‘regulates’ rather than triggers a ‘paradox’ within liberal democracy in that constituent power is always outside the modern state – social contract or not. Any constituent power within the social contract has already been translated and consumed by constituted power. Hence, there is no space for paradox in that the language that is present is squarely that of the state form. However, constituent power persists, explodes, invades, and challenges its captor in quotidian acts of sabotage just as much as in spectacular revolutionary events.

Negri’s long-time collaborator and translator Michael Hardt (1991) characterizes the difference thusly,

In general, [constituted] Power denotes the centralized, mediating, transcendental force of command, whereas [constituent] power is the local, immediate, actual force of constitution. It is essential to recognize from the outset that this distinction does not merely refer to the different capabilities of subjects with disparate resources and potentialities; rather, it marks two fundamentally different forms of authority and organization that stand opposed in both conceptual and material terms, in metaphysics as in politics – *in the organization of being as in the organization of society*. For Negri the distinction marks the form of a response to the Marxist mandate for theoretical inquiry:

³⁸ Foreshadowing a discussion that will take place in the following section on the concept of the multitude, the distinction between difference and antagonism is key. For Hardt & Negri, the multitude is the subjective expression of constituent power. The relation between constituent and constituted power, however cannot for them be approached as dialectical, and hence not as antagonistic, per se. One could go so far as to suggest, keeping in line with their fidelity to an immanent and monist reading of Spinoza, that constituent power can only be considered as antagonistic to constituted power in so far as it has already been at least partially captured.

Recognize a real antagonism (xiii, emphasis added).³⁹

For Hardt, following Negri, metaphysics and politics map on to one another. The ‘real antagonism’ here, or chief defining difference bisecting the social and political terrain, takes the form of two radically different forms of social organization. That is, the difference between constituted and constituent power is not merely that of competing ‘takes’ on the same phenomenon. Rather, the worlds in which each term operates are radically incommensurable. Constituent power is thus not only a structural barrier *internal* to the logic of modern democratic nation-states as it was for Kalyvas, it is also and primarily for Negri a different form of being.

How to make the step from ontology to political organization? If Negri’s project amounts to an elaborate theory of ‘human nature’ there is no reason other than one’s personal preference to believe Negri’s conceptualization of constituent

³⁹ While Hardt and Negri would certainly include themselves in the Marxist tradition, and while theirs like most other theorizations of constituent power are concerned with questions of freedom, liberation from the constraining nature of modern nation-states and capitalist relations of production, there is nothing intrinsically ‘Marxist’ about the concept. Indeed, its emphasis on legitimacy, participation, and inclusion place it more firmly in the camp of democratic theory than that of class warfare. In many of the most important Marxist considerations of the problem of the state, such as those of Nicos Poulantzas (2008) and Bob Jessop (1991) – arguably the first within that tradition to address the state as a contingent object of analysis in its own right – the term never appears in any significant form. Nonetheless, the notion has become important among contemporary Marxist theory of the Spinozist variant, not only for example in the collaborative work of Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri (2000, 2005, 2009), but also in that of John Holloway (2002). The chief benefit to the language of constituent power (and later, as we shall see, of ‘the multitude’) is that it avoids what Benjamin Ardit (2007) describes as the “class reductionism” of most twentieth century Marxisms thereby making it more suited to grasping the social and political upheavals that have characterized the post-1968 moment.

power serves projects for actualizing human liberation better than, say, the liberal legal philosophies at the center of the modern nation state. In his own words, Negri locates the problem as “a question about the construction of a constitutional model capable of keeping the formative capacity of constituent power itself in motion: it is a question of identifying a subjective strength adequate to this task” (25). That is, if constituent power is both the concept and experience of the crisis at the heart of the modern nation-state, the challenge Negri sets in front of it is one of founding a structure capable of both adapting to and enhancing the capacity of constituent power to resist and overcome any potential barrier it faces.⁴⁰ This constitution for Negri is democracy, but an absolute democracy of *immanent democratic practice* rather than the institutional mediations of the liberal representative republic. No exchange, contract, or obedience is possible: the democratic constitution of the multitude is a relentlessly forward moving machine.

This is without doubt a perplexing proposition: a structure that is not a structure but rather a practice. In order to highlight the contours of this problematic, Negri links constituent power with communism as theorized in Marx and Engels’ *German Ideology*. Quoting Marx and Engels, Negri writes “‘Communism is...not a *state*

⁴⁰ Although constituent power for Negri and others represents a fundamental crisis at the heart of modern democratic nation-states, the concept and the challenge by no means originates with the modern. In more recent works Negri – along with Michael Hardt in *Commonwealth* (2009) and with Cesare Casarino in *In Praise of the Common* (2008) – traces the origins of multitude, as an expression of constituent power, as far back as the middle ages and struggles around the enclosures. In an explicitly Marxist register, constituent power emerges as an unavoidable political force in the context of ‘so-called primitive accumulation.’ Indeed, Negri often goes so far as to suggest that the multitude is the raw material from which the body politic is carved.

of affairs that is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement that abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence” (quoted in Negri 1999, 31). Negri translates Marx and Engels’ ‘movement’ for his own preferred *potentia* or constituent power and later ties the terms to Marx’s conceptualization of living labor “that, while destroying the equivocal quality of the bourgeois theory of labor (consolidated, accumulated, dead labor set against the creativity of living labor), shows the bourgeois theory of power itself to be an overdetermination of living labor by dead labor” (33). Constituent power, then, is an experience and an activity. It avoids the pitfalls of reification by remaining firmly tied to the ‘here and now’ and avoids abstraction or idealization. Constituent power is for Negri a structure only insofar as it negates the constraining effects of structure. Put differently, constituent power can be seen both in and beyond the Marxist tradition as the ‘productive forces’ of a given social formation – be it labor-power or the production of subjectivity. The task of the theorist, for Negri, is to initiate an ascending analysis of power beginning from the position of these productive forces, highlighting possibilities and impediments it faces in its attempt to build an immanent democratic practice.⁴¹

⁴¹ Jacques Rancière (2010) highlights three historical phases of Marxism’s analytical and political expansion in his consideration of this question. The first, what could be considered *economistic* era considered the triumph of the ‘productive forces’ (or proletariat) over capital to be inevitable, a matter of science conquering a false presentation. The second, Leninist, intervention recognizes the necessity of politics, injecting a voluntaristic element to a situation that will not resolve itself. The third, our present moment, is an “age that no longer aim[s] at contrasting economic truth to political appearance, or revolutionary decision to economic fatalism, but at integrating in the concept of economic forces the set of procedures that in various

This question of structure, rupture, and democracy is central to how one assesses the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela. However, and more importantly, the Bolivarian Revolution forces a reconsideration of the relation between structure, rupture, and democracy. If one is to take official discourse at its word, the current government is effectively creating institutional sites that are capable of hosting democracy as an immanent *practice* rather than as the mere validation of pre-existing authority at the polls. In this light, officially sanctioned but largely autonomous structures like the (now defunct) *círculos bolivarianos* and the ever-expanding network of *misiones bolivarianas* can be seen as examples of *autogestión* or self-management (or, perhaps less maximally, of *cogestión* – co-management, usually between workers and bosses but in the Venezuelan case often between workers or citizens and the state – given the fact that these programs remain dependent on funds from the central government and have not escaped criticism for being tied to the policies and internal dynamics of the Chávez administration).⁴²

ways, create[s] the common” (88). The notion here, to paraphrase what is by now a leftist cliché, is not only that the ‘personal is political,’ but *everything* is. ‘Productive forces’ increasingly cannot be relegated to factories and workdays. In the context of contemporary capitalism, the production of value takes place *everywhere*, hence, the political subject capable of breaking through this (still) unequal and unjust order must also be omnipresent. For Rancière, as we shall see later in this chapter, this subject can be conceived in terms of multiple, antagonistic, peoples. For Negri, that subject is the multitude.

⁴² The *círculos bolivarianos* (Bolivarian Circles) were neighborhood study and action groups, originally conceived as a way of formalizing the informal networks that formed the base of *Chavismo*. In addition to education work – which led some critics to compare them to the Cuban ‘Comites en Defensa de la Revolución’ (Committees in Defense of the Revolution) – the *círculos* also received government funds for construction, health care, and food. The programs faded throughout 2004 and were eventually replaced by the *misiones* and the *consejos comunales* (communal councils),

The limits to this ostensible autonomy are regularly put into contention. It would also be quite an exaggeration to suggest that this transition is complete or irreversible, and an even greater one to imply that the government is in any way unified on the question of auto- or cogestión. Indeed, the government often demands a higher degree of unity and discipline of its associated movements than the latter would like. Two brief examples from 2008 illustrate the degree to which, in the context of the Bolivarian Revolution, this question of balancing the demands of constituted power with the desires of constituent power remains quite open. It is also on this terrain that we can appreciate differences between subjective expressions of constituent and constituted power, or between multitude and *pueblo*.

In December of 2007 the chain of electoral successes for the government of Hugo Chávez ended with the failure of a referendum on reforms to the 1999 constitution.⁴³ In the aftermath of this defeat, in January 2008 President Chávez declared the Bolivarian movement and government needed to ‘Revise, Rectify and Rejuvenate’ itself in the wake of the failed reforms. This attempt to locate and address the failure of the Bolivarian Revolution’s electoral strategy was all the more important

which still function – by no means uniformly or without controversy – to the present. For a liberal critique of these programs, see especially Hawkins (2006). On auto- and cogestión in the Bolivarian Revolution, see Azzellini (2009)

⁴³ Since winning the presidency in 1998, Chávez or the Chavista bloc was successful in the constitutional convention of 1999 and subsequent ‘megaelections’ in which all elected officials in the country had to be re-elected, a majority of Chavista legislators won their races in regional and congressional elections in 2004 and 2005, and Chávez handily survived a recall attempt in 2004 as well as presidential re-election in 2006. There were also significant gains for the Bolivarian Revolution in union elections as well as in the formation of local administrative bodies – the *consejos comunales* – at irregular intervals throughout this period.

in that regional elections were scheduled to take place in December of 2008. Despite (or perhaps as a result of) this call for soul-searching, reform, and unity, tensions between radical elements of the rank and file and the forces of order within the process intensified throughout the year.

After months of failed negotiations between the *Unión Nacional de Trabajadores* (National Workers' Union – UNT) and SIDOR – an Argentine-owned steel concern – which saw the ‘Chavista’ state governor call on the national guard to disperse striking workers with tear gas and rubber bullets, Chávez announced the renationalization of the company (it had been privatized only in 1997, the year before Chávez took office). Nationalization had been demanded by workers and was accordingly widely celebrated by Venezuelan organized labor. However, the move only came after state repression and the strange interventions of Chávez’s labor minister, José Ramón Rivero. Rivero, in arbitrating the dispute, attempted to impose company-written directives on workers and, two days before being sacked, held a press conference with conservative factions of the UNT in which he claimed the demands of striking workers did not ‘represent the spirit of the Venezuelan revolutionary process.’ Workers, however, refused to accept Rivero’s arbitration and continued their occupation and protest. In the end, Chávez nationalized the company, replaced Rivero with a PCV militant (Partido Comunista de Venezuela – Venezuelan Communist Party), and took up the slogan to bring about a ‘revolution

within the revolution.’⁴⁴ However, the fact that he came to this conclusion only after developments that were so obviously reactionary from the ostensibly *chavista* or revolutionary rank-and-file, and only after the ‘internal right’ had so obviously taken a large degree of power, made the victory somewhat ambiguous.⁴⁵ What is more, that it was Chávez who ultimately settled the dispute only served to reinforce the already disproportionate role of the executive in the Bolivarian process.

A second example of the confrontation between constituent and constituted power *within* the Bolivarian Revolution came in February of 2008, when a pipe bomb exploded in the FEDECÁMERAS building in Caracas. FEDECÁMERAS, Venezuela’s national Chamber of Commerce, was instrumental in the 2002 coup and continues to support anti-government activities to the present day. Shortly thereafter, state police staged raids in the *23 de Enero* barrio, a significant event in and of itself given significant portions of the barrio had for years organized to fight, remove, and bar police and drug dealers alike from entry. That it happened in order to rein in ostensibly wildcat elements of the Bolivarian Revolution was even more eyebrow rising among many observers on the left. For his part, Chávez publicly denounced a number of revolutionary bodies widely (though inconclusively) thought to be

⁴⁴ In the course of fieldwork in Venezuela during in November and December of 2008, I observed this slogan being repeated first hand by Chávez and others in the campaign for the regional elections. As I suggested in my discussion of the elections in the introduction to this dissertation, however, it seems that the closest thing to a ‘revolution within the revolution’ was carried out *not* by Chávez or the candidates he favored, but rather by voters who refused representatives to vote for what they considered subpar candidates. Put differently, the revolution did not work out so well for the official Revolution.

associated with the bombing that were headquartered in the barrio such as the *Tupamaros*, *Colectivo Alexis Vive*, and *Colectivo La Piedrita* while calling for ‘revolutionary discipline.’ In a televised denunciation, Chávez also scolded members of the PSUV who had at the time been engaged in a public anti-corruption campaign that threatened members of the National Assembly and other prominent ‘Chavistas.’ In their turn, many radicals in Venezuela expressed impatience with the government’s seeming willingness to allow the opposition spaces from which it could attempt to sabotage the revolutionary process.⁴⁶

In the case of the SIDOR occupation as well as that of the FEDECÁMARAS incident, the government was forced into publicly playing catch up with what are ostensibly two of the Bolivarian Revolution’s core constituencies: the urban poor and organized labor militants. These cases also illustrate the extent to which the Bolivarian Revolution is internally heterogeneous and the fact that the Chávez administration is at least minimally attempting to stake a sort of middle ground – or at least a legalistic one – among competing social groups in Venezuela. In this regard, the move to eventually nationalize SIDOR as well as attempts to discipline stubbornly ungovernable and autonomous – if usually allied – groups such as the *Tupamaros* and *Colectivo Alexis Vive* illustrate the need for constituted power to constrain and direct constituent power. That is to say, both moments and their actors are based in a local context, they tend towards horizontal forms of organization, and have fiercely fought

⁴⁶ Accounts of and debates surrounding both the SIDOR occupation and renationalization as well as the FEDECÁMARAS incident can be found in the archives of www.venezuelanalysis.com, www.aporrea.org, and www.rebellion.org.

against attempts by the ‘internal rightwing’ to “bureaucratize the revolution” (Altamira, 2009). The government’s call for ‘revolutionary discipline’ in the case of the FEDECÁMARAS incident and its initial moves to subordinate workplace democracy to capitalist notions of ‘efficiency’ – even going so far as to brand striking workers as counterrevolutionary provocateurs – both point to a persistent gap between constituent energy and the rationality of the modern state form.

These pockets of autonomy, and of persistent ungovernability, illustrate the inconclusive and ‘fugitive’ nature of democratic and contentious politics. As long as gaps exist between constituent and constituted power there remains the possibility for forward (as well, it must be admitted, as backward) movement, social change, and the realization of new worlds. However, while this gap is inevitable and perceived as a problem within the framework of liberalism, this is by far not the only framework from which to conceive and practice politics. As such, we must be on guard both analytically and practically against the danger of a revolutionary romanticism that looks longingly to a messianic ‘beyond’ or ‘real.’ However, so too must we be alert to the danger of making a virtue of necessity by resting content that if the system does not produce its own gravediggers, then at least it will produce reformers and reforms.

The question is thus not then if the Bolivarian Revolution has somehow resolved or closed this gap – it seems safe to conclude that at the present it has not, and reasonable to ask if such a move is even desirable – but whether or not it keeps the gap open in new or interesting and useful ways. Consequently, the Bolivarian Revolution also adds a new question to the study of constituent and constituted power

in Venezuela, Latin America, and beyond. If we need, as I have suggested, to differentiate among forms and expressions of constituent power (and later, of the multitude), are we not also forced to at least consider the possibility of new forms of constituted power as well? That is to say, while maintaining as our goal the maximization and autonomy of constituent power, that the task now becomes the development of an analysis of constituted power no longer haunted by the specter of the modern liberal nation-state, either as comparative ideal or ultimate judging authority.

Can Constituted Power 'Rule by Obeying'?

This section asks if there can be a 'legitimate' form of constituted power outside of the contractualism established by the modern nation-state from the vantage point of constituent power. One of the difficulties of discussing questions of constituent and constituted power, aside from the aporias to which they lend themselves, arises from limitations of language and translation. 'Power' as understood in English can among other things mean ability, strength, force, activity, potential, and violence. To differentiate among these rather distinct notions many authors have resorted to the Spinoza's Latin distinction between power as *potentia* and power as *potestas*. *Potentia* and *potestas*, constituent and constituted power, respectively, have to this point been considered solely in Negri's schematization as a relation of irreconcilable difference that projects clear lines of affinity for any resulting political project. Enrique Dussel (2006) argues that this project is philosophically and politically bankrupt, and that Latin America offers key examples of ways to rethink

the relationship between constituent-constituted power in perhaps more nuanced forms than allowed by Negri's maximalism.⁴⁷

A second issue, also related to difficulties of translation, concerns the conceptualization of the '*pueblo*.' As I will explore in fuller detail in the following section, it would be misleading to translate '*pueblo*' as 'people' – at least in Dussel's conceptualization. For Dussel, the *pueblo* is not the organic and unitary 'body politic.' The *pueblo*, in fact, is quite the opposite: it is the excluded elements of a given system. From the standpoint of Dussel's ethics, then, the *pueblo* is an exterior force that transforms a given social order by demanding inclusion and accountability beyond the terms of formal citizenship. Already, then, there are two key differences between the systems established by Dussel and Negri. Whereas the latter considers constituent and constituted power in terms of mutual exclusivity and ontological difference – a determination on the production of subjects – Dussel focuses on the structural determination of a social exteriority and that exteriority's potential to trigger positive change.

For Dussel, the constituent power of the *pueblo* remains undifferentiated and latent until it is actualized in the practical and productive (constituted) power of institutions. He sees the relation between these two instantiations of power as both dependent and necessarily alienating. The power of the *pueblo* feeds that of the institutions that represent it. However, the latter are in their turn positive and

⁴⁷ In the principal work where Dussel makes this argument, *20 Tesis de Política*, Dussel follows this Latin convention. For the sake of clarity in this chapter, however, I will translate Dussel's *potentia* and *potestas* respectively as constituent and constituted power.

amplifying but also inherently prone to entropy, fetishization, and abuse. Dussel argues that without this mediation life itself would be impossible. To think otherwise, he emphasizes, would be to engage in irresponsible anarchist utopianism – a criticism he levies against Negri and Spinoza.⁴⁸

Constituent power *needs* constituted power in order to move beyond its “undifferentiated” status (64). Constituted power is for Dussel the functional form of power, power as potential translated into power as productive, task-specific capacities necessary for the reproduction of human life (33). Within this understanding of constituted power Dussel differentiates between the *exercise* of power by legitimate authorities obedient to the sovereign political community and a power that has become ‘fetishized,’ which has, so to speak, forgotten its roots. He dialectically relates the two terms, arguing they animate one another and produce our political and fleshy reality.

Power is thus not only a relation, but also, “a faculty of the political community, of the *pueblo*” (151). Power, no matter its form, is in the final instance a faculty of the community. A key difference from Negri for Dussel is thus the fact that while the former considers all forms of state power to be part of modernity’s rationalized domination, the latter believes that constituent power *can and must* take instituted, even state, forms:

The *necessary* institutionalization of the community’s power, the *pueblo*’s power, makes up what we call constituted power. The community becomes

⁴⁸ For what it is worth, Negri does not consider himself an anarchist. He rather sees his project as one that seeks new forms of non-hierarchical, non-arbitrary, organization, discipline, and order (see for example Casarino and Negri 2008, 55).

institutionalized, that is to say, *the community has created mediations* for the possible exercise of its power and thus breaks off from the merely undifferentiated community. This division between constituent and constituted power (following but at the same time beyond Spinoza and Negri) between a.) the power of the political community as the original and fundamental foundation; and b.) the heterodox differentiation among the functions of institutions that allow power to be made real, empirical, feasible as it appears in the political field as a phenomenon is necessary. This division marks the pristine emergence of the political, but it is also a supreme danger in that it is also the source of injustice and domination. This division makes all political service possible, but it is also the uncontrollable origin of all corruption and oppression (30, *emphasis added*).

For Dussel, then, constituted power is a functional, but deeply ambivalent necessity of political life. Constituted or institutionalized power is for him of the same order of necessity as agriculture and other basic infrastructural artifacts of human existence (33). Dussel makes this diagnosis and this prescription in pursuit of what he repeatedly asserts to be a ‘critical realism’ necessary for any ethically constituted praxis of liberation (45). This same critical realism thus recognizes that constituted power is like Frankenstein’s monster: working together humans can create life itself, can create more than life itself, but that these new creations can and will come back to haunt us should we leave it to its own devices.

Dussel thus maintains that power in its institutionalized form inevitably tends towards *fetishization* when it becomes detached from and antagonistic to the *pueblo*. Dussel argues that the transfer of power is necessarily alienating, in that institutions come to mediate the *pueblo*’s relationship to its own power (as productive capacity or living-labor, political strength, and creative potential). Institutions thus accrue the ability to command, to organize, to discipline populations and guide them to their own best interests. However, in its fetishized or autorefferential form, “constituted

power destroys constituent power” (45). In other words, the problem is not institutions or mediation for Dussel. Indeed, *if they operate authentically*, institutions *amplify* the power of the *pueblo*. Problems arise when power becomes autoreferential, when it ceases to obey the *pueblo* and begins to fear it.

Ever on guard against these ‘fetishized’ forms of power is what Dussel describes as *hiperpotencia*, or the dynamic power of pueblos to confront and transform fetishized institutional power (97). It is the expression of the ultimate sovereignty – a term Dussel insists on retaining for what he considers ethical reasons – of the *pueblo* against those bodies to which it delegates authority. *Hiperpotencia* amounts to nothing less than the historical transition of power formations from one state of law to another. Or, in terms more amicable to Dussel’s, it is the replacement of one hegemony with another – ostensibly not-yet-fetishized – initially anti-hegemonic socio-historical bloc.

Hiperpotencia is, then, the will animating the dialectic between constituent and constituted power. It is that power of the *pueblo* to reinvent itself and continuously challenge the ‘fetishization’ of institutional power. For Dussel *hiperpotencia* is a *will to live* posed against the Nietzschean ‘will to power’ that has risen in prominence in the post-Foucault era. This *will to live*, he argues, manifests as an affirmational power irreconcilable with the inevitable ‘power over the other’ of the will to power Dussel

contends forms the basis of politics in Nietzsche, Negri, Spinoza, and fellow travelers.⁴⁹

From Negri's perspective, this third term *hiperpotentia* is itself only necessitated by Dussel's system. That is to say, it is only in Dussel's dialectical mode that accusing Negri and Spinoza of negative thought or of being proponents of the will to power as a power *over the other* can make any sense. Furthermore, it is only within the divisions established by Dussel that a critique of Negri's 'anarchism' or 'anti-institutionalism' can obtain. Indeed, what can the *hiperpotentia* for Dussel be other than constituent power for Spinoza and Negri? And more incisively, what might we call the *will to live* other than the Spinozan *conatus*, the tendency towards self-preservation and (importantly) *activity*, that by which all things seek to persist in and maximize being?⁵⁰

My concern with Dussel's systematization lies less with the degree to which it does or does not accurately or adequately represent the thought of Negri or Spinoza. I am rather concerned with the type of constituent power upon which each model depends. If Negri sees in constituent power the absolute democracy of the multitude and the common, Dussel argues that such a model borders on the incoherent and anarchic, that it is at the very least impotent. Thus, while Dussel explicitly charges Negri with lacking the critical realism necessary for politics, Negri might in turn

⁴⁹ See, for a more developed expression of this position, Dussel, "Dialogo con John Holloway (Sobre la interpelación ética, el poder, las instituciones y la estrategia política)." 3 de mayo de 2004. Available at <http://afyl.org/articulos.html>. The fact that the 'will' conventionally understood is presented by both Negri and Spinoza as an utterly bankrupt category is apparently lost on Dussel.

⁵⁰ On this, see especially Spinoza's *Ethics* (2002). But also, see Gilles Deleuze's (2001) *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, especially 97-104.

accuse Dussel of making a virtue of necessity or of confusing what is with what ought to be.

As we have seen, both of these positions of constituent and constituted power are taken up by the discourse of various and often-opposed elements inside the Bolivarian Revolution. Thus, what is at stake in this debate is of more than theoretical or philological interest. The question of the relation between constituent and constituted power and the forms each takes is ultimately a question of revolutionary possibility and the forms democracy can take at the present conjuncture in Venezuela and beyond.

II. Multitude and Pueblo

“Behind the question which arises for any regime – Is the multitude governable? – lies another, which conditions to varying degrees this first question: to what extent is the multitude capable of governing its own passions?”⁵¹

This section is largely a theoretical excursus on political subjectivity, or on the various subjective expressions of constituent power. Negri’s (1999) characterization of the multitude has implications not only for the analytical description of a community and its relation to itself but for western political thought as a whole. The multitude’s existence and persistence in being throws into question the division of human life into spaces or categories – ‘the’ political, ‘the’ economic, public and private, and so forth – that characterize liberal thought.⁵² Any attempt to give political significance to the multitude *on its own terms* is thus to a great extent always itself a move that implodes

⁵¹ Balibar (2008, 58).

⁵² On the multiple valences of Liberalism by the mid-1980s, when neoliberalism had arguably already achieved its highest points of theoretical development and political popularity, see Stuart Hall’s (1986) “Variants of Liberalism.”

the basic frameworks of western political rationality. The danger posed by the multitude to any constituted power is perhaps evident; however, Negri goes one step further, asserting, “the fear of the multitude is the strength of instrumental rationality” (325). Negri in other words insists that Western political theory can be read as a history of attempts to subordinate the power of the multitude to various reasons of state. Here as well as elsewhere, Negri’s wager is at least in part that since the multitude predates modernity’s categories, it offers a viable alternative to the distillation of politics into a forced false choice between sovereignty and anarchy (208).

Dussel’s distinction between the undifferentiated constituent power of the people on the one hand, and the rationalization of that power into the pueblo on the other, is thus for Negri a false one. It amounts to little more than the mystification of politics and power that has defined modernity – betraying a deep fear of and antagonism toward the multitude, the modern bourgeois dismissal of the fickle unwashed masses, and finally, the conservative attachment to the state form. It bears repeating that Negri operates around a completely different question. Here the concern is not one of ‘if’ a state, nor of an ‘anti-politics’ deployed against anything resembling the state form, but rather one of removing obstacles to ever fuller expressions and expansion of the power of the multitude.

In this light any ontologically flattening gesture is anathema to the multitude. However, as Negri writes, “the multitude...although it remains multiple, is not fragmented, anarchical, or incoherent.” Nor does it have the coherence of “the

crowd, the masses, and the mob,” in that the multitude resists passivity, homogeneity, and silence. The multitude is rather comprised of autonomous singularities. It is “an active social subject, which acts on the basis of what the singularities share in common. The multitude is an internally different, multiple social subject whose constitution and action is based not on identity or unity (or much less, indifference) but on what it has in common” (99). There is thus an agentic or at least conscious element to the multitude that is usually precluded from treatments of the either primordial or impulsive nature of crowds and mobs.

How, then, does the multitude compare to the people or the pueblo? The multitude stands against ‘the people’ in an obverse way to its distinction from masses, mobs, and crowds in that these three sociological distinctions all rest on a notion of ‘plural collectivity’ lacking the internal cohesion or identity of a ‘people’ or a ‘nation.’ The multitude is neither unity nor chaos but is rather a contingent collectivity of singularities (a singularity stands in contrast to the transcendental and sovereign individual of liberal social contract theory in that whereas the former assumes a sameness, identity, and unicity, the notion of singularity emphasizes flux, change, interaction, and movement. A singularity is both a unique point as well as a perpetual recommencement. Singularities change in configuration and intensity depending on their interactions with other singularities. Whereas the notion of individuality projects a sameness and a stillness to the subject, singularity is a perpetual and collective activity of creation. It is like a snapshot, or a screen grab from a three-dimensional film that is still for a moment, but a motionlessness that is nonetheless aware that

motion persists.) The multitude is thus *neither* unitary *nor* chaotically heterogeneous, neither nation nor mob. It is, rather, a sort of becoming-common of the various singularities of which it is comprised.

However, and this is key, as theorized by Dussel, the *pueblo* also resides in this space between chaos and unity. Rather than the ethno-nationalist conception of ‘people’ or *ius sanguinis* political community, Dussel’s understanding of *pueblo* has developed in tandem with his participation in popular politics in Latin America. Throughout the course of its development *pueblo* for Dussel has retained a core anticolonial inflection and betrays influences of dependency theory. In many iterations, *pueblo* bears a striking resemblance to the Marxian distinction of the proletariat as a class both in-itself and for-itself. Here Dussel writes of the *pueblo* as “an organic historical collective – not only a mass or a multitude, but a historical subject with memory, identity, and its own structures. It is also the totality of the oppressed of any given system...the *pueblo* is exteriority” (quoted in Salas 2005, 882). Dussel often speaks of the *pueblo* in language that, while more immediately Levinasian, retains its core Gramscian inflection of ‘the popular.’ He writes, “‘class’ is a social condition of the oppressed subsumed by capital in its totality; the ‘pueblo’ is the communal condition of the oppressed as exteriority” (802). Thus, the *pueblo* is for Dussel both the systemic product of social marginality and exclusion as well as a deeper relation to alterity, otherness, or in his words, exteriority.

Both the *pueblo* and the multitude are attempts to conceptualize the subject-form of constituent power. For Dussel, the *pueblo* is something like an overdetermining

force. It is *ethical* in the Kantian sense in that it hails the subject from without and dictates the details and stakes of their formation and action and in the Levinasian order as an exterior ‘other’ that determines the substance of being. This all the more so in that for Dussel, *sovereignty* – if we are to take it as power which requires no determination or conditioning, as the *truly* constitutive moment of any political order – is forever ‘popular’ in that it is always and inalienably *del pueblo* (139).

The *pueblo* serves as ethical principle, a universal born out in the particularities of our experience. This universal principle impels us in unequivocal terms to incorporate into the very core of our being the responsibility of care for the other. He writes, “one must accept that ethics have universal normative principles. However, ethics does not have its own practical field, such that no act can be *purely* ethical. Rather, ethical principles are subsumed and incorporated by political principles and converted into political norms” (70). In other words, ethics traverses the entirety of socio-political space as a normative directive, informing situations at hand and illuminating appropriate action.

In the end, neither approach is completely satisfying or free of limitations. In the concluding section of this chapter I will argue that Dussel’s’ development of *pueblo* and ‘the political’ fails to escape the idealized contractualism of liberal politics. While he is without doubt on the side of the marginalized and a proponent of the so-called ‘right to revolt’ that can be either implicitly or explicitly found at the heart of modern constitutions, such a gesture ultimately fails to escape present power formations. Similarly, Negri’s attempt to think a form of politics and social transformation for the

multitude fails to accurately or honestly appraise the risk of such an enterprise. That is, if the multitude is that which always escapes attempts by constituted power to direct, define, and subsume it, the monstrous forms it takes need to be recognized as well. As Jon Beasley-Murray (2011) observes, “the multitude, always monstrous from the point of view of constituted power, can threaten constituent power too; it can become a bad multitude” (257) to such an extent that “it can be hard to distinguish the multitude from the actual dystopia of Empire” (258). Just as Negri criticizes notions such as pueblo as ultimately serving to neutralize or capture the power of the multitude, so too might the multitude’s ungovernability come back to undermine itself. Hardt and Negri (2009) begin to address this question, the same with which this section opened, in *Commonwealth*: can the multitude govern itself? And, following Sheldon Wolin’s pointed question considered at the outset of the chapter, why would it want to? To govern one’s ‘self’ one first has to freeze the flow of intensities, affects, and interactions that make up life itself. What are the institutional forms – if any are even possible – that allow for this constantly expanding becoming of the multitude? Can constituent power exist without constituted power?

In response to this series of questions, Dussel draws directly from contemporary Latin American experience, and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation of Chiapas, Mexico (EZLN, for its initials in Spanish). The EZLN maintains that the only form of governance acceptable in the context of its revolution is *mandar obediciendo*, to rule by obeying. Such a practice requires intense participation, direct democracy, and generalized social, economic, and political equality in order to

properly function without distortion or manipulation. The gerund here is of particular importance, the *-iendo* implying an ongoing and conscious motion, a process rather than a static or set practice.

At first blush, the oft-repeated characterization of the Bolivarian Revolution as a process – *el proceso* – rather than a fact or government would seem to suggest a resonance with Dussel and the EZLN’s *mandar obediciendo*. However, even in *el proceso* moments of stasis and fetishization emerge. Furthermore, as the promised ‘explosion of popular power’ continues to be postponed for reasons of securing electoral success and battling foreign intervention, Bolivarian discourse’s attempt to subsume and sacralize potentially multitudinous constituent power has been increasingly cited as the cause for maintaining a critical if still comradely distance by those on the left (Denis 2005; Spronk et al. 2011).

On one hand, the attempted inscription of ungovernability might also be seen as an attempt on the part of the Bolivarian Revolution to reproduce the rebellious individual and collective subjectivities that have punctuated political time in Venezuela. On the other, these inscribing processes *may only be able* to serve as attempts on the part of the state to inoculate itself against the destabilizing effects of constituent power. More to the point, Bolivarian discourse may indeed be serving both functions at one and the same time, regardless of its best or worst intentions. Consideration of the stakes involved in this endeavor, however, cannot be undertaken until a more fully elaborated engagement with these explosions of constituent power, to which I now turn.

III. A History of Breaking with History: 1989-2003

In Venezuela, neoliberalism intensified an already exclusionary political order and exacerbated an already lop-sided distribution of wealth (Ellner & Tinker Salas, 2007a). The three ruptures at the center of Bolivarian discourse are explosions in which the excluded and marginal elements of Venezuelan society forced their way into the center of national politics, resisting elite attempts at retrenchment and counterattack. They mark, or better, they gesture toward *openings* in the Venezuelan order that extend beyond representative democracy and provide space for substantive, protagonistic forms of membership in political communities.

There is, however, something of an ambivalent if largely unconscious element to these celebrations. The official narrative of the Bolivarian Revolution claims these moments in which an established order broke down as its own. The *caracazo* is presented as a direct precursor of the Bolivarian Revolution, a *potential* expression and demand for the social transformations taking place today, necessary but not sufficient for carrying through on its revolutionary potential. The Bolivarian Revolution claims to follow the *caracazo* as both chronological successor and spiritual heir. As such, it legitimates itself not through a historical link to a people or territory but rather through recourse to a rupture or event. The Bolivarian Revolution paints itself as the realization or government of ungovernability with every invocation of the *caracazo* and the power of the many. It is from this perspective a *revolution*, not a *state*. It can hope to remain legitimate only insofar as it moves forward in transforming the very stuff of

which it is made according to the actions and the demands of constituent power. Its legitimacy is thus in many ways its impossibility.

Beyond state-sanctioned commemorations, the *caracazo*, the 2002 counter coup, and the reopening of the oil industry in 2003 all point to what has been tragically difficult to recognize for right and left observers alike: the Bolivarian Revolution can by no means be reduced to the figure and role of Hugo Chávez.⁵³ Each instance is an illumination of the separation between social networks and the government, market, or civil society institutions of Venezuela. Indeed, I would argue this autonomy has been the very source of their power; without it, these revolts would not have been possible.⁵⁴

El Caracazo

The *caracazo* of February 1989 dramatically ended the previously hegemonic notion of a Venezuelan social peace (Fariñas 2009). One could in fact quite plausibly read the events as a socio-politically cataclysmic return of the repressed. During the uprisings that lasted until early March, the ever-present-and-constantly-denied class and racial divisions of the *puntofijo* years (1958-1993) violently resurfaced; these tensions continue to dominate the political climate of Venezuela to this day both at

⁵³ This long-term trend in the literature concerning contemporary Venezuelan politics is finally being broken. See for example, Martinez, Fox & Farrell (2010) and Ciccariello-Maher (forthcoming).

⁵⁴ It is also for this reason that I do not address 1999's constituent assembly and rewritten constitution.

the level of political rhetoric as well as that of lived experience (Ellner & Tinker Salas, 2007a).⁵⁵

Between the fall of Marcos Pérez Jiménez in 1958 and the *caracazo* of 1989, Venezuela was characterized by many domestic and foreign observers as an ‘exceptional’ democracy in an otherwise troubled part of the world. According to this widely held and circulated understanding of Venezuelan democracy, the exclusionary regime of the *puntofijo* era was seen as remarkably stable and preferable to the civil war and military dictatorships that characterized Central and South America throughout the 1960s, 70s, and 80s (see, for example, Karl 1997; Kozak Rovero 2008). The Bolivarian Revolution, on the other hand, argues that contrary to the standard narrative, Venezuela in fact did not discover or invent the formula for a post-conflict society at this point in history. The *puntofijo* system and the Fourth Republic, of which it was the last era, was irresponsible to the citizenry, it was corporatist, exclusionary,

⁵⁵ The *pacto de puntofijo*, so named for the location of its signing, was an exclusionary political pact that defined Venezuelan politics after the fall of the dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez in January 1958. Signed by the leaders the leaders of Acción Democrática (Democratic Action, AD), the Comité de Organizaciones Políticas Independientes (Committee of Independent Political Organizations, COPEI), and the Unión Radical Democrática (Radical Democratic Union, URD), the *puntofijo* pact sought to ensure the stability of representative democracy in oil-rich Venezuela. In the agreement, “the three parties pledged to respect the outcome of the forthcoming elections and to work for a common minimum program” (Levine, 1973, 43). In effect, this meant ‘the military option’ was off the future political table and that any radical departure from the three parties’ shared commitment to a political system based on liberal, bourgeois democracy and an economic model based on the distribution of oil rents were effectively precluded. After the success of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 this common program also included the systematic exclusion of the Venezuelan Communist Party (PCV, for its initials in Spanish), a stance that pressed more radical elements of Venezuelan politics to form a short-lived (though ultimately rather influential) guerilla movement (Gott, 2008).

more than occasionally repressive, inept in the fields of governance, development and the economy and hopelessly, infamously and incontrovertibly corrupt (this argument can also be found in varying degrees in official discourse as well as in Coronil 1997; Mommer 2003).

For better or for worse, in the Fourth Republic the Venezuelan state was able to capture competing interests or potential challengers to its authority such as organized labor or an traditional activist civil society through the selective distribution of oil rents.⁵⁶ However, the petroleum export industry so dominated the state and economy that all other productive enterprises were dwarfed and overpowered in comparison. ‘Dutch Disease’ effects – in which the overvalued currency resulting from petrol exports makes imports less costly than developing domestic industry – crippled sector after sector of the Venezuelan economy. The nation urbanized at a breakneck and chaotic pace as landless peasants searched for employment in the interstices of the petroleum export and commodity import industries. Cities grew far beyond their capacity, surrounded by concentric circles of shantytowns. The informal sector exploded. As the fate of Venezuela became increasingly tied to a notoriously volatile international market, the entire country was also increasingly relegated to a precarious state. Corruption increased with and sabotaged every attempt to correct

⁵⁶ This of course is not to suggest that this practice was either complete or successful. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s student movements vociferously challenged the exclusionary *puntofijo* pact and were regularly, brutally, silenced by the state’s repressive apparatuses. There were also rural and then urban guerrilla movements active until the *caracazo*. Many of these movements would later join and in some cases later break ranks with the Bolivarian Revolution and the government of Hugo Chávez (Garrido 2000; Gott 2008).

this trend. By the time of the regional economic crisis triggered by Mexico's external debt default in 1982, Venezuela had gone from one of the richest to the most indebted country in the Americas. This occurred, as theorists who have outlined the resource curse argue, *not* because it ran out of oil but rather because it had *too much* of what the whole world wanted. The petroleum industry generated more capital than could be absorbed by the existing firms and infrastructure of Venezuela's rentier capitalist state, meaning that a boom in profits did not 'trickle down' to other industries or sectors of the population. It was rather increasingly invested abroad. Inequality grew at a breakneck pace during the crisis, as did misery in qualitative and quantitative terms. The reckoning for the political system and the social fabric of Venezuela that had attempted to write over these increasing divisions would be fierce (Ellner and Tinker Salas 2007b; the literature on this moment in Venezuelan history is vast, see in particular and from various and competing ideological positions Ellner 2008; Karl 1997; López Maya 2005; Pérez Pirela 2008).

Puntofijismo's end proved too much for the Venezuelan political order to handle. In the years between the *caracazo* and two failed military coups in 1992, one of which was lead by Hugo Chávez (in the aftermath of which the young Lieutenant Colonel became a national celebrity) a signifying chain developed in which the reigning political order was tied to neoliberalism, and neoliberalism in turn came to signify poverty, suffering, corruption and state repression in the popular imaginary. This association is as important in the official discourse on the *caracazo* as is the commemoration of the event itself and the subjects who pushed it forward. The actual

texture of events – gun battles, looting and redistribution of commodities, extrajudicial executions by the police – are less the focus of commemorations than is the revolt against neoliberalism and the Fourth Republic. As a result, the coup attempt of 1992 – and the potential specter of a return to military rule after a thirty-two year civilian interlude – was met with surprising degree popular support (Di John, 2005).⁵⁷ The first discursive consequence of the *caracazo* can thus be seen on the local level as a collapse in what had come to be seen as a ‘consolidated’ democracy. Or, minimally, the *caracazo* was a particularly bloody and undeniable part of a larger ‘organic crisis’ that in turn functioned as a condition of possibility for the election of Hugo Chávez in 1998 and for the transition into new political and social relations in Venezuela (Fariñas 2009, 89).

The uprisings of February 27th explicitly pitted the poor not just against the government of Carlos Andrés Pérez but also against the neoliberal structural adjustment policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Pérez had recently been reelected president on a campaign platform explicitly antagonistic to the IMF and its impact on Venezuelan society – on the stump he referred to the international lending body as “la bomba-sola-mata-gente” (‘a bomb that only kills people,’ quoted

⁵⁷ The first coup attempt occurred, on the Fourth of February and was led by the Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario-200, at the end of which Chávez delivered his famous ‘*pa’hora*’ speech. The second, a bloodier affair led by elements within the air force was attempted on November 27th. Both coups cited government crackdown in the *caracazo* and the neoliberal impoverishment of the population as motives for their actions. Without backing by the military, the population or the congress President Carlos Andrés Pérez’s grip on power became increasingly tenuous. He was eventually impeached on charges of corruption in May of 1993.

in Coronil, 1997, p. 375).⁵⁸ Once in office, however, Pérez enacted one of the most orthodox Structural Adjustment Programs the continent had yet seen. The Pérez government eliminated nontariff barriers that protected 94 percent of local manufactures, reduced what protections remained by over two-thirds and increased the internal interest rates to 30%. Karl (1997) explains that in order to secure IMF backing for now desperately-needed loans, Pérez, “reduced the fiscal deficit to no more than 4 percent of GDP, lifted price controls on all but eighteen basic food items, cut subsidies for public services (including a 50 percent increase in utility prices and a 30 percent rise in transport fares), increased the domestic price of petroleum (with the first price hike to be 100 percent), and froze employment in the public sector,” (180). The impact of this immediate massive cutting-off of the state’s fiscal capacities was all the more intense given that for years the *puntofijo* system used subsidies and social welfare programs to purchase social peace.

The response from below came immediately. Though initially centered in poor suburbs and shanties of the capital where the shock first manifested in the form of an overnight jump – in some cases over 100 percent – in the cost of transportation, the revolt soon spread and threatened centers of commerce and the gated communities of the rich throughout the nation. A high degree of coordination was

⁵⁸ Pérez was previously president from 1974-79, a term which corresponded with a massive boom in international oil prices. The corresponding expansionary cycle in the Venezuelan economy failed to take for a number of reasons, most significantly corruption, a poorly executed and insincere ‘nationalization’ of the oil industry in 1975, and a lack of political or social infrastructure to adequately reinvest the newfound wealth. He left office in 1979 under the cloud of corruption charges that cost his party the presidency.

exhibited as the revolt spread, in some cases to the extent that neighborhood committees organized themselves into those responsible for the actual looting and those trusted with the job of dividing the spoils amongst the members of the community. After the police proved incapable or unwilling to quell the first moments of the uprising, the president called in the military. The resulting pitched street battles eventually pushed protesters back to the margins of the cities where poor and historically politicized barrios like Petare and 23 de Enero in Caracas then became ‘free fire zones’ for the military. In the end, as many as 3,000 Venezuelans were killed in the nationwide crackdown (Coronil & Skurski, 2006; López Maya, 2003).

The *caracazo* was manifestly political, irrevocably and innovatively so, in a number of ways. Firstly, the collective act of taking and redistributing property challenged the privileging of private property on which a capitalist rule of law is based. These widespread expropriations had something of the carnivalesque about them, as is often the case in explosions of constituent power. Even as tanks made their way to the city center “in the poor barrios high up on the hills overlooking Caracas ‘a party was underway, with champagne, steak, and imported whisky, all products of the looting.’ Salsa and merengue music blared from stolen hi-fi equipment. Common unrest had become shared celebration” (Beasley-Murray 2011, 286). In other words, the breakdown of constituted authority allowed for a moment of exuberance in which modes of sociality not based on the commodity-form and outside the rule of law could be glimpsed. The *caracazo* was, in other words, multitudinous.

This momentary vision of a shared commons, however, proved unable to

survive the state's subsequent move to reimpose *its* order; Pérez remained in power (if only for the time being), regressive austerity measures continued apace, and although protests became increasingly frequent, the insurrection failed at least in the immediate term to blossom into a full-blown revolution. Against this rather gloomy conclusion, however, contemporary Bolivarian discourse hews closer to Dussel's schema of constituent power, depicting the decade between the *caracazo* and the constitutional convention of 1999 as merely an *interregnum* in the rule of the *pueblo* that began on February 27th, 1989 (in addition to numerous speeches by Chávez and members of his government, see Iturriza López 2006; G. Pereira 2006). Indeed, from this perspective, the *caracazo* exposes the *need* of constituent power for constituted power in that without stable institutions, the uprisings can be dismissed as little more than an excessive party that was quickly quashed by (fetishized) constituted power.

Second, open resistance to the repressive state apparatuses challenged the monopoly over the legitimate exercise of violent force at the root of modern sovereignty. The *caracazo*'s cycle of insurrection and crackdown was important first in that it exposed the violence of state power, the asymmetry in immediate capacities between constituent and constituted power, and the latter's overwhelming violence and the unconquerability of the former. As Dussel (2006) emphatically notes, "*Pueblos* are invincible...[in order to defeat them, constituted power] would have to kill all of the members of the *pueblo* if they have an effective, consensual, strategic and tactically expressed will-to-live" (98). In other words, the great constituent power of the *pueblo* resides in the being-together of its members. Once that being-together is oriented

towards an end of its own choosing, the only way for the state to stop it is its literal annihilation.

Finally, the reappropriation of wealth that took place throughout the *caracazo* required a large amount of impromptu organization, often carried out without the benefit of officially recognized institutional structures. Unions, for example, had for quite some time been something of a labor aristocracy. As captive clients of pacted petrol-democracy, they were reluctant to rush to the defense of the informal sector workers most directly and immediately harmed by austerity measures and who made up the majority of the *caracazo*'s participants in the *caracazo* (Ellner, 2008; Mommer, 2003). Indeed, even revolutionary entities – such as the incipient Bolivarian networks linking radicalized members of the military and clergy with urban and rural social movements – were surprised by the insurrections and were unable to channel them into more sustained and sustainable forms (Chávez, 2005; Garrido, 2000). In other words, the *caracazo* is important in that it introduced new actors to the political scene in Venezuela (and arguably, to the world). Even more importantly, these new subjects also practiced new power relations and new forms of sociality, however briefly.

The *caracazo* should thus be understood as an event that broke an existing order, negating the *puntofijo* system's regulation and repression of the social antagonisms at the core of Venezuelan society. During the *caracazo*, the excluded opened a new space and expression of constituent power. A new sociality was born, though it was immediately, if only temporarily, drowned in its own blood.

‘*Todo 11 tiene su 13*’: The April 2002 Counter-Coup

The second popular explosion deployed by Bolivarian discourse occurred on April 13, 2002 with the overthrow after 48-hours of a coup orchestrated by the private media, the military high command, the CTV (Confederación de Trabajadores Venezolanos, Venezuelan Workers' Federation)⁵⁹, the managerial board of PDVSA (the state oil company) and the Chamber of Commerce, FEDECÁMARAS. At this point in the Bolivarian Revolution, the Chávez government could scarcely be considered 'socialist.' Indeed, the first years of the Chávez regime in Venezuela, though nominally still part of the Bolivarian Revolution, were characterized by a pragmatic economic and political reformism despite rhetorical gestures toward social revolution (Wilpert, 2007). In this way, the insurrection that returned Chávez to power was mobilized by the *possibility* he represented as much as by a hatred of the enemy that had taken his place (Ellner, 2008; Wilpert, 2007).

If the multitude – or pueblo – that came to rescue Chávez on 13 April was mobilized by the *potential* the former paratroop commander embodied and the image he projected, so too was the coup itself inspired by the specter of future threats to the interests of Venezuela's rich. The most palpable threat – though rather mild in

⁵⁹ The CTV had long been considered by many to be the labor-wing of Acción Democrática (Democratic Action – AD, for its initials in Spanish, was the dominant party in the *puntofijo* system). Its leadership, in particular, had since at least the 1970s dropped any pretense of working class militancy in favor of a policy of *cogestión*, or shared management, that saw the interests of workers and management and thus of workers and the state as common. By the time of the 2002 coup, the CTV had for years been in an intense series of ideological and political struggles over the direction and identity of Venezuela's largest union. However, while a number of left-wing and *Chavista* tendencies and challengers to AD control of the union had resulted in contested elections and wildcat unionism, it took the open subversion of the union's directorate and white-collar elements in the 2002 coup and the 2003 lockout to dislodge these elements of the 'labor aristocracy' (Ellner, 1993; Williams, 2002).

comparison to the response and paranoia it engendered – came in the form of forty-nine decree laws passed by Chávez in late 2001.⁶⁰ Most disconcerting for elites were the new land and hydrocarbons laws. The land law mostly impacted the still-powerful *latifundia* – or mass landowners – in the countryside, and opened the door for the landless poor to occupy and settle unused farmland. The hydrocarbons law, meant to end the privatization of the oil industry that began with the *apertura* (‘opening’) of the 1990s, would have also forced the directorate of the national oil company PDVSA (Petroleos de Venezuela, S.A., or Venezuelan Oil Incorporated) to open the company’s books for public scrutiny.⁶¹ FEDECÁMARAS for its part vehemently opposed all of the decree laws as attacks on private property. When Pedro Carmona, the president of FEDECÁMARAS, was installed by the military as president of the country on 12 April, 2002 his first acts were to abrogate the forty nine enabling laws, suspend the 1999 constitution, and declare martial law (Wilpert 2003).

From late-2001 until the day of the coup, FEDECÁMARAS and the directorate of PDVSA worked in conjunction with the CTV and the private media to

⁶⁰ The ability for the President to pass laws by decree – with congressional pre-approval and for a limited period of time – has long been a feature of the political system in Venezuela, as it has throughout the region. Based on a rather loose interpretation of a state of exception (martial law need not be declared in conjunction with these ‘enabling laws’), this aspect of a strongly presidentialist representative system was retained when Venezuelans rewrote their constitution in 1999.

⁶¹ PDVSA had for quite some time been considered something of a ‘state within a state,’ a status that only grew stronger with the ostensible ‘nationalization’ of the nation’s oil during the first term of Carlos Andrés Pérez in 1976. Opening the books was a rather unpleasant proposition for a ‘national’ company that for years invested their profits abroad (for example, in the purchase of the US-oil company CITGO) in order to keep out of the reach of cash-strapped politicians at home (Tinker Salas 2009).

carry out a series of civic and labor strikes. On April 11, 2002, a strike and massive march called to protest the President's attempt to replace the executive board of PDVSA with his supporters started in the affluent east side of Caracas. In the course of the march, organizers redirected the crowds toward the presidential residence, where a pro-government rally was taking place. When pro and anti government forces met, a clash ensued in which shots were fired and nine – mostly *chavista* – Venezuelans were killed. (Subsequent investigations have implicated military and police sharpshooters in the killings. To this day none of the intellectual masterminds of the coup or killings have been held accountable). Citing the need to impose order, the military high command stepped in, deposed the president, and named the head of FEDECÁMARAS interim head of state. Two days of martial law and a media blackout were ended by what by all accounts was a spontaneous mass uprising of the urban poor and revolt of junior military officials demanded and achieved the return of Chávez to the presidency. The architects of the coup for the most part scattered to Colombia, Peru, and Miami.⁶²

A key to understanding the thirteenth of April and its weight in Bolivarian discourse lay in the fact that, much like the *caracazo*, the uprising took most by surprise. While there had been a fair amount of organizing by the government in the massive barrios ringing the country's major cities, it would be a stretch to imply that it had the level of control over the population that many in the Venezuelan opposition,

⁶² The events of April and the role of the private media in the ouster of Chávez are vividly captured in Kim Bartley and Donnacha Ó Briain's (2002) the documentary *The Revolution will not be Televised*. Also see Beasley Murray (2011).

along with a number of political scientists in the United States, often suggest (see, for example, Hawkins & Hansen, 2006). Nonetheless, neighborhood-level self-help networks that predate the Chávez government – arguably strongest in the poorer Western Caracas parishes of 23 de Enero, Catia, and La Vega, where a number of Chavista cabinet and national assembly members weathered the coup – were no doubt central to the counter-coup. That these barrios are neither internally homogenous nor directly controlled by the Chávez government can be seen in incidents like the FEDECÁMARAS bombing of 2008.

While there is a high degree of cohesion and discipline amongst the most politicized and organized elements of these areas, their relation with the state, even under Chávez, has often been rather fraught. Martinez (2010) observes for example, “after years of police repression and abuse, 23 de Enero, with the help of the local city government, finally succeeded in kicking the police force out [of] the neighborhood in 2004...collectives now coordinate security among each other” (271). In other words, the relation between the state in Venezuela and its most militant supporters is far from halcyon or obedient in nature. While the Bolivarian Revolution still enjoys a high degree of popularity in places like 23 de Enero, support is contingent the government’s performance.

Jon Beasley-Murray (2011) notes that the coup of 11 April could in many ways be conceived in terms of a battle between televisual discourses just as much as a battle between competing social forces (292). While the private media manipulated or covered up news of the protests and kidnapping of the president, state media decried

the coup with increasing desperation until anti-government forces seized the transmitters. In the days between coup and counter-coup, pro-Chávez forces went ‘underground,’ relying on pirate radio stations and word-of-mouth networks in the barrios in order to coordinate their response. This informal and networked response took the place of the usually centralized transmission of pro-government discourse through representation.

However, this (pro-Chávez) multitude mobilized, according to Beasley-Murray, as much against “a televisual regime in which Chávez himself was fully complicit” as it was against the private business-military pact at the head of the coup. Beasley-Murray continues: “Chávez’s government depended all too much on the figure of the president himself, whose promise of a *direct contract* through televisual means was shown to be remarkably insubstantial. Chavismo created the political vacuum that briefly allowed a far-right pact of arms and commerce to take control. In the event, however, the multitude came to fill that vacuum” (296, emphasis added). From this reading the autonomous and networked forces that mobilized on 13 April did so not due to their fidelity to the figure of Chávez but to enact a type of organization *through their force* to make substance of the promise of an unmediated politics. Chávez had all but created a power vacuum *before* he was kidnapped by the military. When the multitude ‘stepped in’ on 13 April it also occupied that political space and effectively prevented the return of a representational and alienating democracy. Since its return to power, the Chávez government has tried to adapt to and temper this new reality – with, as we have seen, mixed results.

A brief examination of some mass-produced and distributed popular iconography provides a telling glimpse into the importance of the events of April 2002 for the Bolivarian Revolution's discourse. The thirteenth of April not only reads as a defiant '¡no volverán!' ('they'll never come back') – a defensive and reactive posture that is perhaps predictable – it has also been invested with new layers of meaning, particularly in order to signify support for the forward march towards a presumably socialist future. This is evident not only in the speeches and celebrations that mark the anniversaries of the counter-coup, but also in the visual iconography of the Bolivarian Revolution on T-shirts, banners and impromptu murals (see figure 1).



Figure 1.1 "Every 11th has its 13th: The Pueblo is still on the street, but today it's on the road to socialism!" (Source: <http://aristobulo.psuv.org.ve/2011/04/11/%C2%A1uh-%C2%A1ah-chavez-no-se-va/que-el-mundo-lo-sepa-en-venezuela-todo-11-tendra-su-13>).

The slogan "Todo 11 tiene su 13" (every 11th has its 13th) displays the historical and political stakes of the coup and counter-coup. Blacked out Venezuelan flags (the 7-

starred flag of the Fourth Republic) hover in the background, waving in multiple directions, suggesting chaos, weakness, disorganization, above the ‘Todo 11’ signifying the coup.⁶³ The 11th is thus depicted as a return to the past, both in the official symbols of the Fourth Republic but also in the perspective of the image. The response ‘tiene su 13,’ interrupts with the vivid tricolor, the 8 stars of the Fifth – Bolivarian – Republic and a unified leftward march. The image not only recreates in a snapshot the events of April 2002 and warns would-be coup plotters against any future adventures, it imposes a direction and purpose on the insurrection that, like the *caracazo*, can only retroactively be assigned. In other words, the uprising of the 13th did not seek a return of Chávez’s (at the time, perhaps necessarily) cautious and coalition-oriented policies. Both the *Chavista* government and the multitude acknowledge this point. Rather, as radical strains within *Chavismo* emphasize, the counter-coup must be seen both as an affirmation of the ‘power of the people’ *and* a rejection of the State form and all it stood for that emerged during this ‘exception’ (Gott 2005; Wilpert 2003).

While the *caracazo* continues to be commemorated as the original break pitting the majority of Venezuelans against the neoliberal model and state power, the 2002 countercoup is perhaps a less ambiguous event vis-à-vis the Bolivarian Revolution. That is to say, the *caracazo* not only took place a decade before the election of Hugo

⁶³ After the renaming of the country with the new constitution in 1999, many of Venezuela’s official symbols were also changed. Among other changes, an eighth star was added to the flag. The opposition immediately raised protests that Chávez had overstepped his mandate and refused to use the new symbols. One can often divine the political allegiances of a particular neighborhood based on the flags displayed by its inhabitants and the local government.

Chávez – which could be seen as the beginning of the Bolivarian Revolution’s ‘institutional’ phase – it would be much easier to interpret it as a revolt *against* state power than as a revolt *for* a ‘better’ state power. In the multitudinous and excessive moment of the *caracazo* social relations were inverted. State power was able to reassert the normalcy it desired and needed only through bloody repression. In the *caracazo*, the state itself killed the hope of a new Venezuela. With this in mind we can tentatively suggest a reading of these revolts in terms of multitude and *pueblo*. The 13 April counter-coup requires much less retrofitting in order to domesticate it for the Bolivarian Revolution’s purposes than does the *caracazo*. While I have suggested that a reading of the counter-coup in terms of a people’s love for their president would be too easy, it is nonetheless more integrated into the statist aspects of the Bolivarian Revolution than its predecessor. It was, after all, Chávez who was returned to power two days after being kidnapped by a nefarious – and US-backed – conspiracy in April of 2002. More significantly, the dynamics of constituent power and its institutional realization are ostensibly much more clear in the countercoup than the *caracazo*. The people took to the streets in 1989 and were quashed by the military. They failed to resurface in 1992 when Chávez himself led a failed coup attempt. In 2002 the multitude mobilized and Chávez was returned to the presidency.⁶⁴ Thus, whereas Bolivarian discourse must do the work of locating and translating the meaning of the *caracazo* before inserting it into its own history, the countercoup of April 2002 is much

⁶⁴ Beasley-Murray (2003) refers to this mobilization as a “pro-Chávez multitude,” which already suggests a degree of coherence and differentiation precluded by Negri’s all-encompassing monism (294).

more ready-made for a reading that ties the current government directly to the constituent power it claims as its base.

The *caracazo* can and should be seen as a definitive break with the Fourth Republic and the *puntofijo* era. However, to make the subsequent move of claiming it to be the first step towards the election of Hugo Chávez – as if it exists as mere harbinger – is to execute the work of capture historically carried out by constituted power. From this latter perspective the Bolivarian Revolution's discourse presents a self-understanding as following the demand issued by the pueblo in February of 1989. *Within this discourse*, the countercoup of April 2002 then confirms that the Chávez government is ruling by obeying.

'El Golpe Petrolero'

After the April 2002 coup the Chávez government moderated. However, rather than allow for something approaching a national reconciliation, management at PDVSA and transnationals operating in the country immediately moved to further destabilize the country. Their plan was to bring down Chávez by cutting off the state's access to oil revenues. From December 2002 to February 2003 a bosses' lock-out paralyzed the national oil industry which in turn brought the economy as a whole to a standstill (Weisbrot, 2008; Weisbrot & Sandoval, 2008). The lock-out, in which this oil-exporting nation found itself in the bizarre position of *importing* petroleum to meet its contractual obligations, only came to an end when retired oil workers, members of

the military, and foreign contractors aligned with the government forcibly reopened the oil facilities (Ellner 2008; Kozloff 2006; M. Lebowitz 2007).⁶⁵

While this mobilization does not lend itself as easily to a ‘multitudinous reading’ as do the previous two cases given in that it was the government itself that coordinated the forced-reopening of oil production sites, it does however point to the changing political terrain in Venezuela. The retaking of the oil industry was also the third time in which the confrontation between the foreign and domestic interests and the poor majority of Venezuelans played itself out in the streets. With this third mobilization – referenced and celebrated, though by no means as often or as reverently as the previous two cases – a turning point was reached in the history of the Bolivarian Revolution. From this point on there was an intensified coordination between popular and worker self-organization and the central government. While there had been coordination, particularly for electoral mobilizations, between the state and social movement networks previously, from 2003 self-organized groups of

⁶⁵ Obviously, this does not include members of the military who took part in the April 2002 coup, nor those who occupied eastern Caracas’ Plaza Altamira in fall of that year in open rebellion against the Chávez government. The composition of forces in the military is a complex question in Venezuela. While Chávez enjoys wide support in the military and often plays up his identity as a former officer, there remains in the barracks a degree of resistance to some of changes that have been envisioned for the Armed Force (FAN, or Fuerza Armada Nacional). Perhaps the most significant tension has been around the very nature of the FAN as either a ‘traditional’ and professional standing army or a ‘popular militia’ of the armed and politicized public, an issue which was hotly debated in the lead up to the constitutional referendum of December 2007. Finally, Chávez has been criticized by many for including many former and current service members in his government and in the social programs of ‘Plan Bolívar 2000’ both for the supposed ‘militarization’ of Venezuelan society (a critique usually levied by the opposition) and for the fact that many of the ex-officers now make up a large part of the ‘internal rightwing’ of the Bolivarian Revolution (this latter critique issued by the far left in Venezuela).

workers and citizens began to play a more protagonistic and interactive role in their dealings with the state (Santana, 2006). It was also this moment that saw the establishment of the *círculos bolivarianos*, (the now-defunct predecessors to the *consejos comunales*) that sought to give institutional, budgetary and legislative form to the informal social and neighborhood networks that had been so critical to the countercoups of 2002 and 2003. Chávez and his government have attempted to contain and direct these energies for its own purposes through orchestrated marches, a return to spectacular and media-driven politics centered on Chávez himself and through encouraging participation in *cogestión* projects such as the *misiones* and worker-controlled factories. In moments like this the government seeks to muster up its *pueblo* but runs the risk of unleashing a multitude.

This is the concern of Roland Denis (2005), an allied leftwing critic of the Chávez government and Vice Minister of planning at the time of the oil coup. Denis argues that the mobilization against the lockout marked a revolutionary high point in the Venezuelan process. While he contends the worker militancy in December 2002-February 2003 *forced* the question of socialism back on the table in Venezuela there nonetheless remain significant institutional strongholds in which the traditional bureaucratic and technocratic elite, are entrenched. Most notably, he argues that the pro-poor land law was ‘timidly’ enforced, and worse, PDVSA fell back to its technocratic and bureaucratic ways, “a black box closed to social oversight and open to strategic alliances with businesses like Chevron-Texaco that had no place

whatsoever in the language nor cookbooks of the revolution” (11).⁶⁶ In short, the response to the lockout has indeed been celebrated and integrated into the discourse of the Bolivarian Revolution, but the actual practices that made the popular counteroffensive successful – *autogestión*, transparency, and workplace democracy – remain exceptional experiences in Bolivarian Venezuela.

On the other hand, as a result of this second opposition-precipitated crisis, moderates within the government and movement were isolated. Radical voices pushing for a more fundamental break with neoliberalism and a more direct form of democracy prevailed. Thus, if the April coup unmasked or exposed the real intentions and alliances of the opposition, the oil coup reinforced the belief for poor Venezuelans and the Chávez government that the opposition could not be considered ‘loyal,’ ‘responsible’ or ‘reasonable,’ nor that their actions were carried out in ‘good faith.’ In other words, the opposition discredited themselves repeatedly, and in so doing made a more fundamental and less-compromising break with Neoliberalism possible. The speed of this change, at least until 2006, began to pick up pace (Ellner 2008; Harnecker 2006; Martinez, M. Fox, and Farrell 2010).

IV. Constituent and Constituted Power after their ‘Explosions’

By the time of the 2004 referendum on the Chávez presidency – the first time the opposition employed constitutional means to challenge him – the rank-and-file of

⁶⁶ “...la caja negra cerrada a la controloría social y abierta a las alianzas estratégicas con empresas como Chevron-Texaco que no caben en ninguno de los vocabularios ni recetarios de la revolución.”

the Bolivarian Revolution was all but entirely made up of the urban and rural poor.⁶⁷ This was a shift in a number of ways. Chávez was initially elected by a cross-class (with the exception of the richest of the rich) segment of Venezuelans in 1998 that shared a common dissatisfaction with the *puntofijo* era and the Fourth Republic. Chávez was seen as an outsider whose nationalistic anti-neoliberal rhetoric resonated with a broad segment of Venezuelans (Wilpert 2007). At this early stage Chávez can still be considered a ‘populist’ in that he embodied something of a Lacanian *point de captation* for multiple and perhaps competing claims against the reigning order (Laclau 2005). However, rejection of the previous political order was in the end rather impermanent glue for the coalition, as it proved incapable of withstanding the pressures of attempts to rein in PDVSA and the aspiring mobilizations of the poor.

Secondly, not only did the poor and marginalized increasingly exclusively identify with Chávez, so too was more of this traditionally abstention-prone social bloc turning out for elections. What is more, there were *more* elections in 11 years of the Chávez government than in any other period in Venezuelan history. In addition to normally scheduled Presidential, Legislative, and Mayoral elections Venezuelans have voted in recall referenda, constitutional conventions, union elections, and communal council decisions.

Finally, in the aftermath of the oil coup the government began the process of *democratizing consumption* in earnest. After recovering from the crippling blow to the economy caused by the lockout the government began distributing the profits of the

⁶⁷ Ironically, the ability to recall public officials was a constitutional provision for which Chávez himself lobbied in the 1999 Constitutional Convention.

oil industry through the *misiones bolivarianas* (Bolivarian Missions) social welfare programs. These programs, of which there were over 25 by early 2011, have indeed brought about concrete results. Illiteracy has been functionally eradicated building on the successful Cuban ‘¡Yo Sí Puedo!’ program. Between 2003 and 2007, the national poverty rate – measured in the purchasing power of a citizen’s cash income – was halved (from 54% of the population to 27.5%) and extreme poverty cut by two-thirds (from 25% to 7.6% of the population). Non-cash benefits, like access to free or heavily subsidized health care and education, are harder to quantify, but there is little doubt that they are having significant impacts in terms of the quality of life and aspirations of many Venezuelans. School enrolment has skyrocketed, up 86% in higher education since 1999, 54% in secondary and 10% in primary (primary school enrolment was already at 91% in 1999). Employment has also increased with the expansion of the Venezuelan economy in the 10 years of the Bolivarian Revolution, with two million formal economy jobs being created in the private sector and over 600,000 in the public sector (Weisbrot, 2008; Weisbrot & Sandoval, 2008).

One should not conclude, however, that these developments equal socialism, much less that they represent some sort of unleashing of constituent power and dismembering of constituted power. Indeed, they can in many ways be seen as an extension of the developmental state model. A glut of oil money in the first decade of the twenty-first century allowed the Chávez government ample political and fiscal room in which to manoeuvre. According to Venezuelan government statistics, the Gini Coefficient – the statistical measure of income inequality, the closer to zero being

the most equal distribution – has only shifted from 0.487 in 1998 to 0.420 in 2007 – making it nearly a statistical equal to the United States (Weisbrot 2008). United Nations’ Human Development Indexes (UNHDI) are less helpful, as their numbers are based on 2003 data, a year marked by the economic collapse and troubled recovery that resulted from the oil coup. Nonetheless, the UNHDI finds Venezuela’s richest 10% received 35% of the national income, whereas the poorest 10% only 1% (Reports 2009). In other words, in terms of raw economic data, Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution, while having made inroads, still has much to do in order to achieve its stated minimum goals of social justice and the elimination of poverty.

Consumption has been democratized through the government’s armada of social programs but the underlying class and social structure of Venezuelan society have yet to be transformed. Quality of life conditions remain starkly unequal, marginality continues to define the living conditions for many Venezuelans, the opposition remains intransigent and a bureaucratic class set on managing and slowing the pace of revolutionary change has entrenched itself in the state apparatus. Against this, the slogans among the most radical elements of the rank-and-file are telling and have been increasingly widespread: “Poor un socialismo sin PaBuCo!” (for a Socialism without bosses, Bureaucrats or Corruption), “Hay que profundizar la revolución bolivariana” (the Bolivarian Revolution must be deepened), “una revolución *en* la revolución” (a revolution *in* the revolution). I witnessed these slogans being articulated first hand by the radical Bolivarian rank and file (as well, it must be admitted, as by figures of the internal rightwing, suggesting a fair degree of rhetorical

shallowness or flexibility)⁶⁸ during the 2008 regional election campaign, ostensibly a time when calls for unity and discipline were most likely to be heeded, when constituted power's demand to hew to the party line was most credible. These slogans illustrate the rich terrain of struggle *within* the Bolivarian Revolution, one that I would point to three possible readings of the gap between multitude and the *pueblo*.

The first, Negrian reading, points to the multitude's ungovernability. Slogans to deepen and revolutionize the Bolivarian Revolution are from this perspective evidence that the multitude has not been transformed into a *pueblo*. Retaining its autonomy, the multitude continually exposes the limitations of an institutional and elections-obsessed revolution. It *regulates* the democratic process. By highlighting the continued presence of 'bosses, corrupt officials, and bureaucrats,' these slogans express an outrage at the lack of a revolution in the revolution. They illustrate the modern state's inherent antagonism to authentic, democratic, expressions of constituent power.

The second reading, more in line with Dussel's conceptualization of the *pueblo*, see in these slogans and clashes within the PSUV and the Bolivarian Revolution the healthy functioning of *hiperpotentia*. Contention within the ranks is part of the virtuous cycle of politics, preventing the Bolivarian Revolution from becoming stagnant, autoreferential, or fetishized. Whereas the first reading considers the slogans to be evidence of the perpetual *being-against* of the multitude, this second reading suggests an organic link between constituent and constituted power. For

⁶⁸ For example, by members of *Marea Socialista*, which describes itself as a 'radical current' within the PSUV, and former Vice President Diosdado Cabello, respectively.

Dussel, the pueblo *creates* the mediations that distinguish the latent power of the community and the expression of that power in the form of institutions. However, these mediations are not and cannot be static or eternal; they must be replaced depending on the demands of the conjuncture. When the pueblo's *hiperpotencia* fails to press the limits of constituted power, democracy devolves into tyranny.

Finally, the third, speculative reading of this gap points towards a potentially new form of constituted power. In Dussel's account of the *hiperpotencia* of pueblo, the internal stirrings of revolt come about as a reaction to the inevitable entropy of constituted power. But what if the state in question *invites* this perpetual pressure to move forward, to change, to adapt? While this chapter has focused on the way in which Bolivarian discourse attempts to integrate explosions of ungovernability into the narrative of government, this discourse also goes much deeper into Venezuelan history, reinventing figures of the nation's past. This third reading of the gap between multitude and pueblo follows Simón Rodríguez's formula 'inventamos, o erramos' (either we invent or Cautioning against the truism that necessity is the mother of all invention, the Bolivarian Revolution has in numerous cases proven extremely willing to experiment with new forms of civic participation and government's role in the lives of the public. Thus, whereas the first two readings of the gap between constituent and constituted power imply a reactionary relation, this third, perhaps more sympathetic reading sees the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela as an expansive, inclusive, and perpetual process. It reads the Bolivarian Revolution *not* as a top-down affair that *presumes* state power but rather as a sequence *driven* by constituent power in which the

state is a contingent manifestation perpetually ‘catching up’ to the changes created by the multitude. In other words, this ‘multitudinous democracy’ breaks with the liberal social contract in that it refuses to naturalize and internalize either party of constituent or constituted power. Rather by conducting an ascending analysis, it insists that multitude, pueblo, and state are contingent, co-constitutive, and *open* to the power (and caprice) of constituent power.

III. Conclusions: A ‘multitudinous’ Democracy?

The difference between multitude and *pueblo* most salient for the purposes of this chapter has in many ways hinged on their respective notions of unity. There is an element of insight in the well-worn protest slogan ‘el pueblo, unido, jamás será vencido’ (the people, united, will never be defeated). *Pueblo* remains inchoate until it moves beyond its normal, fragmented state. The power of the *pueblo*, in other words, can only be found in its becoming-one. To this Hardt and Negri (2004) counter that any subsequently enforced unity or peoplehood flattens possibility and creativity, neutralizing the capacity of the multitude. In their estimation,

The people is one. The population, of course, is composed of numerous different individuals and classes, but the people synthesizes or reduces these social differences into one identity. The multitude, by contrast, is not unified but remains plural and multiple. This is why, according to the dominant tradition of political philosophy, the people can rule as a sovereign power and the multitude cannot (p. 99, emphasis in original).

The multitude is thus something more primordially authentic in the life and practice of subjects. As such, for Hardt and Negri, the multitude is always poised against the forces of control; in the face of a sovereign power that reduces difference, the multitude emerges as a force or expression of resistance.

While multitude and ‘people’ are also of key importance to the work of French philosopher Jacques Rancière (2010), the accusation of a theoretical and political ‘flattening’ is reversed. Rancière contends that Hardt and Negri’s politics is based on a primary “phobia of the negative, of any politics that defines itself ‘against’, but also of any politics that is nothing but political, that is founded on nothing other than the inconsistency of the egalitarian trait and the hazardous construction of its cases of effectivity” (86). This ‘egalitarian trait’ is for Rancière the basis of politics in that it posits a fundamental incommensurability among elements. The conflict between these two concepts, in other words, is not based merely in competing notions of the subject of politics but also and perhaps primarily for Rancière on notions to *politics itself* that are mutually exclusive.

For Rancière, in any given situation a *representation* of equality and identification clashes with the presence of a supplement, an uncounted or unrepresentable element that he identifies as the people. ‘The people’ thus stages an “ambiguity” and politics is therefore “the enacted discrimination of that which, in the last instance, is placed under the name of the people: either the operation of differentiation which institutes political collectives by enacting egalitarian inconsistency or the operation of identity which reduces politics to the properties of the social body or the fantasy of the glorious body of the community. *Politics always involves one people superadded to another, one people against another*” (85, emphasis added). Here is a notion of ‘people’ that is rather close to that of Dussel’s conceptualization of *pueblo*. Both terms insist on a gap between a dominant representation of political

power and subjectivity and the clash between this given (constituted) power and another, exterior, element. For Hardt and Negri, there can be no outside in the globalized world of Empire. The multitude, they contend, is *everywhere*.

Rancière claims that such a position essentially entails something of a refusal of politics *tout court*. Much against the expressed wishes of its chief theorists, the concept of the multitude flattens and homogenizes the political terrain by staging “a stance for a subject of political action unmarked by separation, a ‘communist’ subject in the sense that it denies the specificity of particular *dispositifs* or spheres of subjectivation” (86). Hardt and Negri’s refusal of separation and their particular brand of Spinozist-monism have been critiqued for the way in which it mirrors a strain of Christian millenarianism in which, at the end of the day, we need neither fight nor despair, as the becoming-together of the community has already taken place (see Brennan, pp. 97-120 in Balakrishnan 2003; for a more sympathetic critique, see Beasley-Murray 2011).

Malcolm Bull (2005) also criticizes Hardt and Negri on this question of unity and efficacy. For Bull, the dichotomy drawn by the authors of *Empire* between the unitary nature of ‘the people’ and the multiplicity of ‘the multitude’ is false. Bull thus echoes a key question of this chapter, “the multitude is not a new political agent invented by Spinoza, or the losing side in the political struggles of the seventeenth century; it was always the raw material of the political. The only question was: how could the multitude become an agent?” (39). Or in other words, *even* if one shares the opinion of Hardt and Negri that the multitude is the first and last creative political

and economic subject, *who cares?* If the multitude can only be spotted in the exceptional case, or eulogized in anniversaries and by academics, to what more can it aspire than to one day be able narrate its own eulogy?

The question is thus not if the multitude is captured or neutralized by the pueblo. It is rather, from a strictly Spinozist standpoint, if the *form* the multitude takes *as pueblo* does more to enhance its capacity for expansive expression, its egalitarian force, its ability to persist as a creative, moving, capacity. *Mutatis mutandis*, the matter is thus not one of constituent versus constituted powers, but rather the particular forms or expressions these attributes of the multitude take. Western liberal juridical thought, for example, recognizes constituent power only in moments of founding or referendum (McCoy 2010). Constituent power is thus only visible retroactively, through the lens of constituted power – after the social contract has been ‘signed’ and usually only when it is being enforced by constituted powers more repressive elements.

Likewise, constituted power is considered by many within the Marxist-Spinozist tradition exclusively as a negating, violent, repressive force even in its best, most humanistic manifestations (Holloway 2002). However, this fails to accurately depict the most important elements of the Bolivarian process – those in which an unapologetic sovereign power has followed the lead of the self-organizing and ungovernable, and where it has not just failed to capture them *but has not even tried*. What has been most instructive in the Bolivarian Process has thus not been the ways in which the Chávez government has ‘opened space’ for autonomous actors but quite

the opposite. The Chávez government and its claim to the Bolivarian Revolution have *themselves* been made possible by the space opened up by the explosions of the *caracazo*, the counter-coup, and the retaking of the oil industry – all of which were the actions of elements that are allied to the process but beyond the control of the President, his party, or the Venezuelan government.

The dichotomy between horizontalism and verticalism is thus also in many ways a false one in that it implies a stasis of forms that simply has not been the case in Venezuela. Similarly, the multitude both always is and is not the multitude. It adapts to the needs of the moment, both developing new forms of collectivity and drawing from familiar repertoires of organization – including that of the *pueblo*. Put differently and by way of conclusion, to consider the Bolivarian Revolution as a ‘government of ungovernability’ carries at least two implications. The first is that of a reading of power from the perspective of the theorists of multitude: government attempts to marshal ungovernability as a legitimating fiction. In this, the Bolivarian Revolution’s discursive positioning differs rather little than so many Sarkozies singing the *Marseillaise* or US presidents invoking Jefferson while sending eighteen year olds to die for the rich.

But there is another, messier and more tentative reading of the government of ungovernability, more in line perhaps with Dussel’s characterization (his misreading of the multitude aside). What if this is precisely what a government of ungovernability looks like? Here the Bolivarian Revolution, with all of its missteps, lunges, and retreats is more than mere testament of constituent power’s resilience. Indeed, what can

testifying to such a resilience offer other than patience for the return of the messiah or the smugness of an eventual, 'final' victory? The government of ungovernability is the result of a constituted power that seeks to link itself to an expression of constituent power that it cannot control, to in a sense catch up with history.

Chapter Two

The Problem with Populism: Development, Coloniality, and Anxiety

“Serious leadership is needed, not irresponsible populism.”

-Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez,
speaking to the *Washington Post* in 2000
on how to deal with the economic problems
faced by his administration⁶⁹

The first chapter of this dissertation examined attempts by the Bolivarian Revolution to channel and extend a constituent power that I contended was both outside of its control and which the Venezuelan government claims to be at its very heart. While the result of this dynamic between constituent and constituted power is a constantly moving target, we can nonetheless note the degree to which the Bolivarian process breaks with liberal norms by gauging the amount of anxiety it has produced among established powers both at home and around the world. In this and the following chapter I examine populism as one of the most prominent ways in which ostensibly non-liberal political experiences have been characterized in Venezuela and Latin America more generally.

The present chapter looks specifically at discourses *about* populism generated (for the most part) by social scientists located in the global north. These discourses serve to regulate what I will describe as an international division of legitimacy that has come to define the ‘postpolitical,’ globalized world of the post-Cold War era. In the

⁶⁹ Quoted in Gott (2000,196).

following chapter, I deal with recent revisionist treatments of populism that I will argue overestimate the extent to which ostensibly populist political phenomena break with the norms of liberal democracy. In other words, this present chapter is concerned with the anxiety exhibited by social science discourses surrounding populism's potential break with a relation between constituent and constituted power that privileges the latter over the former, the social contract, and the possessive individualism of modern liberalism. The following chapter critiques populism insofar as it *fails* to break with these artifacts and attributes of the modern nation state. In fact, I will argue, it does quite the opposite: populism reinforces rather than revolutionizes the vertical or hierarchical relation between constituted and constituent power. It stifles rather than fosters new forms of political community and social subjectivity.

In this and the following chapter, I examine this gap between the shifting revolutionary imaginary and developments in political economy through an interrogation of the concept of populism. My present task will be to illustrate the way in which populism serves as a regulatory technology in the modern/colonial world system, reinforcing hierarchies and thereby imposing particular forms of subjectivity, appropriate behavior, and expectations. I argue that discourses about populism mark Latin American and Venezuelan politics in particular as deficient, corresponding to a developmentalist logic at the core of modern epistemological power relations. To therefore dismiss the Bolivarian Revolution as populist not only misses what is unique and uniquely possible in Venezuela today, it also reinforces a global order of political

legitimacy whereby liberal representative democracies are considered ‘normal’ and all other regimes pathologized objects of concern. At one extreme discourses *about* populism contend that populists – both leaders and ‘their’ usually unrecognized or dismissed ‘masses’ – *are not like us*. ‘They’ are therefore dangerous threats or backwards elements, *enemies or objects to be molded and formed in whatever image chosen by the ‘developed’ subject of political modernity*.

These chapters should thus be seen as two ‘takes’ on the same series of questions: to what extent, if any, can the concept of populism tell us anything about the Bolivarian Revolution? How does the Bolivarian Revolution challenge the substance and function of populism in Venezuela, in Latin America, and beyond? What are the individual and collective subjectivities that produce and are produced by the Bolivarian Revolution? How do these challenge the normative presumptions of populism, or even of populism as an object of inquiry itself? And to this end, what in Venezuela today escapes the populist optic, and how do these fugitive elements challenge the contractual assumptions of the modern liberal nation-state, of which populism is seen as a deviant variant?

All this is not to make what I consider to be the incorrect claim that the Bolivarian Revolution definitively breaks with the forms and limitations of modern liberal governance. As I argued in the previous chapter, to the extent that it remains a state it also remains tied to a familiar expression of constituted power. This role is perpetually challenged, but it persists nonetheless. Even less so has the Bolivarian

Revolution broken with global capitalism. Indeed, given the country's persistently singular reliance on oil exports and the Chávez government's increased expenditures on social welfare programs, one could argue that the Bolivarian Revolution is just as if not more dependent on the capitalist world system than previous regimes (see, for example, Thomas Purcell's comments in Spronk et al. 2011). While pursuing Bolivarian foreign policy's goal of a 'pluripolar' world, Chávez has repeatedly gone out of his way to defend the rights of sovereign states – even those ruled by unsavories like Iran's Mahmood Ahmadinejad, Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, and even as late as the summer and fall of 2011, Libya's Muamar Gaddafi. Thus, in the absence of a readily recognizable 'socialist' socioeconomic model of Soviet, Cuban, or even Chilean variants, many commentators and activists have dismissed the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela as barely reconstructed populism. Without an immediately visible or undeniable and substantive shift in the mode and relations of production, the changes occurring in Venezuela have thus been dismissed by some on the left as mere epiphenomena distracting from 'authentic' or 'true' revolutionary transformation and by the right as irresponsible demagoguery.

The left critique corresponds surprisingly with that of many social scientists critical of populism in general and what they see as a new form of this ostensibly enduring Latin American phenomenon in Venezuela. Kirk Hawkins (2003), for example, argues that political *chavismo* "relies on a charismatic mode of linkage between voters and politicians, a relationship largely unmediated by any institutionalized party, and...bases itself on a powerful, Manichean discourse of 'the

people versus the elite' that naturally encourages an 'anything goes' attitude among Chávez's supporters."⁷⁰ He concludes, "these populist qualities undermine the movement's democratic potential" (1137). From this perspective, populism is problematic in that it warps the institutions necessary for the appropriate functioning of a democratic society. For analysts like Hawkins, democracy is equated with the mediating institutions of representative liberal governance. These critiques of the Bolivarian Revolution as lacking institutional legitimacy circulate around the not necessarily mutually-exclusive assertions that the process taking place in Venezuela today lacks substance in that it is *merely political* or that it fails to live up to its promises in that it is a *less than democratic form of democracy* (here allowing for multiple and competing definitions of democracy).

Of course, the critique of the Bolivarian Revolution as 'populist' is unsurprising coming from a political scientist invested in the government, economy, and national interest of the United States. However, the critique from the left – which tends to emerge from *within* Venezuela itself as much as anywhere else – concerning the often-sizeable gap between the words and deeds of the Chávez government, is telling. Bolivarian discourse's emphasis on transcending the capitalist mode of production, the commodification of labor power, and the hierarchies of the modern/colonial world might thus be contradicted by bilateral trade agreements with (for example) China, government-sponsored private sector entrepreneurship, and the

⁷⁰ Indeed, one of the chief defining characteristics of populism is its ideological inconsistency and eschewing of left-right distinctions. Thus, populisms tend to be named for the figure at the head of the respective movement – *chavismo* in Venezuela, *peronismo* in Argentina, *fujimorismo* in Peru, and so forth.

unavoidable enduring experience of race and class hierarchies in Venezuela today. What is more, the *political* forms the Bolivarian Revolution has taken, and in particular the centralizing tendencies of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV for its initials in Spanish), all point to an extension of the past rather than its supersession (see, for example, Roland Denis's comments in Spronk et al. 2011).

This can also be seen both in programs that provide seed money for small and local ventures as well as the larger, more opportunistic emergence of a 'boli-burguesía.' This neologism is used by radicals within the larger Bolivarian movement to derisively refer to the segment of the traditional business class whose enterprises remain solidly structured by the profit motive, but who have *politically* aligned themselves close to the government in order to gain access to lucrative state contracts. Indeed, one could make the case that some of the biggest winners of Bolivarian economic policy have been national enterprises who were the victims of structural adjustment programs under previous regimes but who now enjoy the protection of a renewed attempt at import substituting industrialization. However, and here politics again intervenes, the 'boli-burguesía' remains a relatively small minority of the Venezuelan business community; most (especially big) business owners remain vehemently opposed to the Chávez government. Populism is from this perspective seen as an attempt to smooth over the potentially cataclysmic consequences of these contradictions by subsuming them into a rhetorical and spectacular form of politics (Uzcategui 2011).

In any case, the term populism is not used in a particularly endearing fashion. While it is true that the government of Hugo Chávez has been much more rhetorically critical of capitalist or neoliberal economics than it has been able to substantively create and sustain alternatives, the Bolivarian Revolution nonetheless articulates a powerful anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist discourse that has proved influential far beyond Venezuela.⁷¹ As such, its importance for the political imaginary both inside and outside of the country should not be underestimated. Although Venezuela is far from a workers' paradise it nonetheless presents a powerful horizon and prospect to the realization of the so-called 'alterglobalization' movements' slogan that another world is possible.⁷² Most directly, it forcefully puts the question of the state's role in social transformation back on the table, reintroducing the challenge of *the political* after thirty years of the neoliberal colonization of all aspects of life by the logic of the market.

⁷¹ His administration has been both heterodox and pragmatic on this question. While it has taken great strides in the 'democratization of consumption' and the shoring up of the welfare state since at least 2003, it has also developed programs rather similar to the grassroots neoliberalism of microloans and emphasized the need to protect and expand private property regimes à la Hernando de Soto's (1989) *The Other Path*. Experiments in social and collective forms of property ownership have advanced much more slowly.

⁷² 'Alterglobalization' here refers to a position that emerged in protests against the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization, and other regional-free trade blocks, particularly in the mid- to late 1990s. Given the dominant discourse that linked 'globalization' with these transnational financial institutions and structural adjustment, these movements were quickly labeled 'antiglobalization.' However, note Hardt and Negri (2009), "participants in these movements were uncomfortable with the term because, although the challenge the current form of globalization [...] their proposals focus on alternative but equally global relationships of trade, cultural exchange, and political process – and the movements themselves created global networks" (102).

The literature on populism in Latin America is vast, to say nothing of the general literature on populisms throughout the globe. Even more difficult for the task of generalization, this literature stretches across academic disciplines and policy circles with little in the way of consensus among contributors to the debate. This in part explains my decision to devote two chapters to populism and the Bolivarian Revolution. In the present chapter I will critique populism as a concept developed in the social sciences from a perspective outlined by the modernity/coloniality group of Latin American and Latin Americanist critical theorists. From this line of inquiry, many social sciences discourses *about* populism can be seen as serving a disciplining purpose that confer upon certain institutional and policy practices a ‘normal’ status that should be disseminated globally. Other arrangements, such as those labeled populist, are diagnosed as dangerous hybrids that call for observation and intervention.

1. Development and the Coloniality of Power

In this section I outline the relation between developmentalist discourses, the coloniality of power, and populism in a historical and global perspective. For the present purposes, I will consider developmentalism, developmentalist discourse, and ‘modernization theory’ as sharing a common epistemology in which a highly stylized European model is established as the focus and goal all other societies are compelled to pursue. As such, I will treat them synonymously, even if modernization might better be considered as a subtype of developmentalist theory. My argument develops in three stages. First, the discourses around development that first became prominent

in the context of the Cold War established a global criteria by which societies were judged to be normal and successful or deficient and in need of any number of types of ‘assistance.’ Second, this division follows a series of political and epistemological patterns that date back to Europe’s fifteenth century colonial expansion in the Americas. This division established, followed, and continues to follow racialized terms, the recognition of which requires attention be paid to the cultural logic of power not just in the ostensibly ‘postmodern’ and ‘spectacular’ present, but throughout the modern/colonial world. Finally, the highly imbricated relation of these elements is on full display in the contemporary literature on populism.

Both development and modernization theory rest, at their most fundamental and basic levels, on the division of the world between ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ societies. They both assume, furthermore, that history operates in a linear fashion, that progressive change is both inevitable and defined in terms of a given society’s similarity or difference to the developed, modern west, and in the context of the Cold War, that the national interests of the United States was served by accelerating this process in so-called ‘underdeveloped’ nations. The work of Samuel P. Huntington (1971, 2006) has been central to this tradition, especially in the United States, arguing that the process of modernization is revolutionary, complex, systemic, lengthy, phased, homogenizing, global, irreversible, and progressive. For this line of thought modernity and tradition are mutually exclusive; the latter emerges from the ashes of the former, and each are singular, universal, forms. Tradition, then, is modernity’s

noxious past. In the best case tradition is thus seen as an exotic or embarrassing backwardness. In the worst, it is a threat and a challenge.

Howard Wiarda (1999) offers a helpful genealogy of three dominant approaches to Latin American development in the second half of the twentieth century. For Wiarda, developmentalism, dependency theory, and (his preferred) ‘Latin American Traditions’ approach are all geohistorically specific and each in some way or another respond to the other schools of thought. The first, “developmentalist school,” mostly emerged “out of North American, positivistic comparative politics and the United States foreign aid program” (50). This school of thought can also be characterized by Walt Rostow’s argument that all societies individually and inevitably advance or retreat along a staged model of progress from ‘traditional societies’ to ‘high mass consumption.’⁷³ Immanuel Wallerstein (2004) notes that as a “theory of stages” developmentalism “assum[es] that the separate units – ‘national societies’ – all developed in the same fundamental way [...] but at distinct paces” with the result that “the ‘most developed’ states” could urge lesser-developed states to “engage in a sort of mimicry [...] promising a higher standard of living and a

⁷³ Rostow, a national security advisor to US Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, argued that all societies progress in stages from ‘traditional’ to ‘high mass consumption.’ Progress and modernity are thus conceived in a teleological manner whereby countries follow the examples set by Western Europe and North America. As the subtitle to Rostow’s (1971) *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* suggests, developmentalism as a discourse and policy is firmly entrenched in the context of the Cold War. Throughout his career Rostow advocated the United States and its allies take on more interventionist roles in order to prevent newly emerging postcolonial states in Africa and Asia from ‘going red.’ Latin American countries, which had carried out decolonization from Spain and Portugal long before were also considered candidates for development, and especially so after the success of the Cuban Revolution in 1959.

more liberal government structure ('political development') at the end of the rainbow" (10). Developmentalism, in other words, is a layered cultural, economic, and political ensemble that describes in order to proscribe the correct means by which national societies can advance up a global civilizational ladder. In so doing it also – and some would suggest this was the primary cause of the discourse rather than one of its effects – naturalized *both* asymmetrical global power relations *and* the interference of 'advanced' countries into the affairs of 'developing' nations.⁷⁴

This has been striking in recent Venezuelan history, with the Clinton, G.W. Bush, and Obama administrations all funding opposition 'civil society' groups under the mandate of 'democracy development.' Groups ranging from those dedicated to the violent overthrow of the Chávez government to political parties and NGOs have received monies, training, and international legitimacy to, in the words of the National Endowment for Democracy's mission statement, support the "growth and strengthening of democratic institutions around the world." The semantic slippage here is telling, but perhaps less than surprising. 'Democracy' has become the marker of political legitimacy in these unipolar years of the early twenty first century, and democracy is defined by the world's only superpower in terms first of perceived threat to the national interests of the United States and second in a given state's structural

⁷⁴ Wallerstein notes that this 'stagist' model of development was by no means the exclusive territory of the United States and the West more generally. He writes, "the Soviet Union knew a good thing when it saw one. It too adopted the stages of development. To be sure, Soviet scholars changed the terminology for rhetorical purposes, but the basic model was the same. They did, however, make one significant change: the Soviet Union, not the United States, was used as the model in the Soviet version" (10).

resemblance to United States. As Venezuela drifts farther afield from the policy prerogatives of Washington, it becomes an object of concern in need of correction and intervention (on both covert and open US intervention in Venezuela, see Golinger 2006, 2008).

In response to developmentalism's Cold War designs, the dependency school sought to correct what it perceived as the empirical and ethical failings of developmentalism. This school began from the insight that "rather than United States and Latin America's development going forward complementarily and in harmony, the development of the industrialized countries had occurred at the cost of, and often on the backs of, the developing nations" (Wiarda 1999, 55). The critique posed by the *dependentistas* placed particular emphasis on developmentalism's treatment of societies as isolated entities propelled along a universal teleology by purely endogenous factors.⁷⁵ Such a perspective ignores the highly interwoven and uneven nature of global trade. Dependency accuses developmentalism of glossing over the 'developed' world's need to keep the developing world in a permanently underdeveloped status as primary product and commodity sources. By basing its analysis at the level of discrete

⁷⁵ World Systems Analysis poses another prominent critique of developmentalism. In this tradition, analysts such as Immanuel Wallerstein (2004) have argued convincingly that developmentalism incorrectly approaches national economies as isolated entities propelled by endogenous (and often cultural) factors. Rather, this school contends, political economy and development need to be approached as global and interlinked phenomenon, and that rather than considering states as discrete entities, the world is divided at the most abstract and general level of analysis into 'core' or dominant states and 'periphery' or dependent and subordinate states. World Systems Analysis can thus also be seen as a fellow traveler to dependency theory as well as to David Harvey's (2005, 2006a) work on capital as a global system that both spreads and regulates itself through processes of 'combined and uneven development.'

national economies rather than the capitalist world system, dependency theory maintains, developmentalism blames the victims themselves for their subordination to European and North American industrialization.

On dependency theory, Wallerstein (2004) notes, “the basic idea was very simple. International trade was not, they said, a trade between equals. Some countries were stronger economically than others (the core) and were therefore able to trade on terms that allowed surplus-value to flow from the weaker countries (the periphery) to the core.” Thus, “underdevelopment was seen not as an original state, the responsibility for which lay with the countries that were underdeveloped, but as the *consequence* of historical capitalism” (12, emphasis added). From this diagnosis came a prognosis that was striking not only for Northern theorists of development, but for local governments and communist parties as well. “Inspired as [they] were by the Cuban Revolution” many *dependentistas* found orthodox communist historicism to be “a mere variant of the US government line (build liberal bourgeois states and a middle class first). The dependentistas countered this line of the communist parties *theoretically*, by arguing that Latin American states were already part and parcel of the capitalist system and that therefore what was needed was socialist revolutions now” (13, *emphasis in original*). Thus in the place of a progressive path shared by discrete national economies, dependency theory posited an expansive *capitalist world system*, in

which the stronger 'developed' economies not only work to maintain their privileged status, they also *produced* those unequal power relations in the first place.⁷⁶

Against Dependency and Development theories, Wiarda (1999) describes his third approach to understanding political and social change in Latin America, the 'Latin American Tradition' or 'Political Culture' approach, with which he most closely identifies. He argues, "much of dependency theory, not unlike developmentalism, is utopian, excessively politicized [...] and often based on a faith or belief system whose truth or falsity is not always verifiable by the usual canons of scholarly inquiry" (58). Against what he describes as the excessively ideological, dogmatic, and place-blindness of developmentalism and dependency, the Latin American Tradition approach suggests

that the Latin American socio-political tradition by way of feudal, medieval Spain and Portugal is unique and distinctive. Latin American development has particular features of its own. It is a product of the Middle Ages, of a particular politics, sociology, and worldview. It fails to correspond exactly to the 'grand,' presumably universal (at least in the eyes of their own advocates) models advanced by either the developmentalist approach or the familiar Marxian categories. Because of its particular history, religion, culture, law,

⁷⁶ For the purposes of the present chapter, the key differentiating element between dependency theory and the World System Analysis of Wallerstein and others has to do with the level of analysis. The former focuses on the (usually complex and multi-actor) relations between core and peripheral economies whereas the latter (especially in its original formulations in the 1970s) focuses on the Capitalist World System as a whole and examines the functions of regions or states within this global framework. Their similarities should not be underemphasized, neither in terms of conceptual apparatus nor in consequence. As James Petras (1981) noted some time ago, "to conceptualize the issues of the Third World in terms of dependency or as part of a world system is to lose sight of the most decisive processes of class formation and social relations which beget change and the particular configurations of social forces which emerge on a world scale. It is not the world system that begets change in social relations, but rather social forces that emerge and extend their activities that produce the world market" (150).

education, scholasticism, Thomism, the *Reconquista* and other features, Latin America exhibits some peculiar features that are particularly its own (59).

Thus, if developmentalism was philosophically Eurocentric and politically designed to benefit core economies, and dependency theory amounts to so much utopian dogmatism, the Latin American Tradition approach hopes to build an analytical framework that is both authentically from and for the region.⁷⁷

Wiarda is quick to defend himself from potential claims of essentialism, stereotyping, or blindness to the importance of political and economic factors in development. He sees Latin American Tradition as one part of a “complex *multi-causal* analysis” (60, emphasis in original). As such, while acknowledging that culture is dynamic rather than immutable, Wiarda argues that ‘development’ of some sort has happened in the region – Latin America today is more urban, literate, and middle class than it was a generation ago – and that its specific shape and trajectory have been largely determined by its own history. Thus, “democracy triumphed but it has taken various Latin American, (Rousseauian, organic, corporatist, tutelary, democracy-with-adjectives) forms; neoliberalism may be triumphant but it remains strongly statist; a middle class has emerged but it often thinks like the elites and may not be a bastion of stability and centrism” (64). Latin America has changed, but it only bears a vague ‘family resemblance’ to the changes proscribed by either dependency or developmentalism.

⁷⁷ This is of course to set aside the question of what can ‘authentically’ be said of ‘Latin American Traditions,’ or who gets to make such a determination. For problematizations of the notion of culture, identity, modernity in historical and contemporary Latin American cultural and political studies, see Jorge Larraín (1997) and Nestór García-Canclini (2005).

While this genealogy certainly takes us far in recognizing the limits of developmentalism and its critics, there nonetheless remain a number of questions unanswered by Wiarda's characterization of the question. His outright rejection of dependency theory as 'too rigid and ideological' is perhaps true for those *dependentistas* who ascribed to a barely reconstructed orthodox (and Eurocentric) Marxism. However, in doing so Wiarda also sweepingly dismisses work within the Latin American Marxist tradition that entails a critique *both* of capitalist development as well as the Comintern's failure to grasp the particularity of Latin American societies, most strikingly that of José Carlos Mariátegui, José Aricó, and Aníbal Quijano. All three of these thinkers developed critical and particularly Latin American Marxisms that approach capitalism as a system that articulates local differences to its global apparatuses of control, thereby accounting for *both* the dependency theory's emphasis on self-reproducing core-periphery power relations *and* Wiarda's stress on local political cultures.

Wiarda's critique does well to examine modes of development either produced by or imposed upon Latin American societies today, however it fails to ask the question of 'why' development in the first place, preferring instead to position some sort of progress as a *fait accompli* to which we must now adjust. By avoiding this 'why?' Wiarda runs the risk of falling back into developmentalism's conflation of the historico-political with the natural, rendering modernization both inevitable and irreversible. Paraphrasing Walter Mignolo (2007), such an approach risks merely elaborating 'alternative modernities' rather than alternatives *to* modernity and thus

fails to escape the universalizing, Eurocentric logics of other approaches to understanding political, social, and economic change in Latin America.

This critical move has been initiated by the modernity/coloniality group, who assert that modernization is impossible to think or execute outside of Europe's colonization of the rest of the world and its continuing political, military, economic, and epistemological dominance. Colonialism did not, in other words, end with formal independence for Latin America (nor for the twentieth century's postcolonies in Africa and Asia). Indeed, one could make the argument that Europe's domination increased as it became less visible; postcolonial elites both internalized their former masters' worldview and reproduced the social structures of domination left in the wake of decolonization (Fanon 1991; Mignolo 2005). Modernization is in this light by no means a society-spanning processes of Kantian 'Enlightenment' whereby subjects emancipate themselves from their own self-imposed tutelage and infancy. Quite the contrary, modernization is merely a new form of subordination and servitude.

Arturo Escobar (1994) contends that developmentalism not only failed to better the living standards of the majority of Latin Americans but was never in fact designed to do so in the first place, even according to its own declared criteria. Through a process that he describes as the 'problematization' or 'discovery' of poverty in the 'third world,' geopolitical spaces like Latin America increasingly became *objects* in need of correction: passive and ready for redesign by the 'developed world' (22). Thus, rather than developmentalism's emergence as a response to the preexisting problem of 'third world underdevelopment' Escobar asserts, the discourse

of developmentalism – a post World War Two phenomenon – divided the world by three, *creating* ‘underdevelopment’ in the Third World (6).

It would be incorrect, however, to assume that this sort of geo-civilizational project was undertaken exclusively by the powers of Western capitalism during the Cold War. Dependency Theory was in many ways development’s mirror, contends Ramón Grosfoguel (2008), insofar as “many dependentistas were still caught in the developmentalism, and in some cases even in the stagism, that they were trying to overcome” (307). In other words, dependency and development are not only linked in competition for influence in the context of the Cold War, but also and more fundamentally by a shared epistemology and historical structure that privileges industrialization and Western forms of modernity. According to Grosfoguel and others in the modernity/coloniality group, the two approaches share a common goal that privileges modern techno-science as goal and a method, they differ only in their respective roadmaps.

This critique resonates with Walter Mignolo’s (2007) assertion that modern revolutions from the French to the Soviet amounted to little more than ‘family feuds’ *within* modernity, or battles over the legacy and execution of Enlightenment ideals (473).⁷⁸ Paraphrasing Enrique Dussel (1995), both the approaches of US-sponsored

⁷⁸ Mignolo contends that another current runs within this trajectory, exhibited by the wars of national liberation that begin with Haiti and extend to the anticolonial struggles that followed World War Two. However, Mignolo’s argument assumes a much higher degree of unity and homogeneity here, missing Fanon’s (1991) crucial insights into the internally divided nature of colonized societies and the pernicious effects of the “colonial bourgeoisie” in maintaining the coloniality of power in the twentieth century post-colony. More directly to the point of the present conversation

capitalist developmentalism and its Marxist critique betray symptoms of the ‘myth of modernity.’ Developmentalism wholeheartedly embraces a posture idealizing the achievements and inevitability of progress while championing the seemingly unassailable trio *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*. However, in so doing, it covers modernity’s other myth, that which according to Dussel “justif[ies] genocidal violence” in the pursuit of spreading these Enlightenment values (66). This second myth subordinates means to ends and justifies whatever is deemed necessary in the pursuit of leading or forcing traditional societies down the path to modernity. Even if dependency and Marxism more generally tend to decry the blatant hypocrisy of this myth, *they still seek the same goal*: a rationalized, modern, and developed society.

The relation between tradition and modernity characteristic of both good and bad faith developmentalisms is that of the coloniality of power. Coloniality is the *logic* of domination, distinct but arising from the historical experience of European colonization, that extends to ways of knowing and being in the world. As logic, coloniality outlasts the foreign offices, race laws, and other unconcealed structures of command and control. Like developmentalism, the “‘coloniality of power’ refers to a crucial structuring process in the modern/colonial world-system that articulates peripheral locations in the international division of labor with the global racial/ethnic hierarchy and Third World migrants’ inscription in the racial/ethnic hierarchy of metropolitan cities” (Grosfoguel 2007, 220). Developmentalism, then, is a discourse

on developmentalism and coloniality, Mignolo’s seeming reduction of liberation to the identities of the combatants misses James C. Scott’s (1998) assertion that all too many national liberation movements when in power ascribed to a hyper-modernist ethos that literally sought to destroy the old in favor of the new.

that divides the world into naturalized civilizational ‘stages’ that expresses itself through a racialized logic of dominance and subordination. As a result, it naturalizes and justifies hierarchies of the access to labor, wealth, and social capital.

Developmentalism operates spatio-temporally, dividing the world into zones, and measuring the progress of the civilizations within. After the pattern is established, one’s origin becomes an explanatory variable in determining one’s political identity and aptitude – as is the case in Wiarda’s Latin American Tradition explanation of enduring social structures of Latin American societies.

As Aníbal Quijano (2003) notes, the coloniality of power “determine[s] the social geography of capitalism” (208). It underlies “all forms of the control of subjectivity, culture, and especially of knowledge and the production of knowledge” (209). Developmentalism divided the world into normal and problem zones in the postwar era. However, the fundamental logic of division dates to the fifteenth century and the formative moments of European (Spanish and Portuguese) colonization of the Americas, Europe’s ‘first modernity,’ and the birth of capitalism as a world system (Aníbal Quijano and Wallerstein 1992). To the extent that Marxist (or any other) critiques of developmentalism share its valorization of civilizational ‘progress’ or fail to recognize that domination occurs on a cultural plane as well as in the economic base, they can only ever reproduce colonial social classification (Aricó 2010; Grosfoguel 2007).⁷⁹ In Mignolo’s (2007) more maximalist estimation, the “de-linking” necessary

⁷⁹ Here, one is reminded of Lenin’s definition of communism in 1920 as ‘Soviets plus electricity.’ In other words, the goal of Marxists throughout much of the twentieth century was essentially the same as their capitalist enemies. Socially and

for a politics capable of escaping the coloniality of power “could hardly be thought out from a Marxist perspective, because Marxism offers a different content but not a different logic” to the modern/colonial world system (462).

This is precisely what is at stake in this chapter’s reappraisal of the concept of populism vis-à-vis the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela and the coloniality of power. Populism as a concept is almost always a diagnosis of some sort of deficiency. At best it is a less than democratic form of democracy. For example, during the presidential primary season in the United States populism is portrayed as an unfortunate and usually insincere attempt to fool voters into identifying with a candidate’s ‘down-to-earth-ness.’ At worst for some observers, the coarseness of the populist is not a show, but rather the danger inherent to democratic systems whereby rule by the masses results in the unqualified and irresponsible taking power. In Latin America and Venezuela, populism has been conceived as a holdover from traditional rule by *caudillos*, which could in turn be seen as retooled *conquistadores* and *hidalgos* of the Spanish Reconquista and conquest of the ‘New World’ (Lynch 1992).

In this manner, political sequences that do not follow Europe’s path to development are at one and the same time stigmatized and normalized. Populists are harmful but to be expected among lesser-developed polities. While I want to caution against a reactive over-valuation of phenomena labeled populist (a task I develop more fully in the following chapter), the coloniality of power allows us to understand

civilizationally, they both looked to realize the promises of modernity. Politically and economically, they were of course diametrically opposed on the question of how to get there.

the geopolitical and epistemological functions of these developmentalist discourses on populisms. Populism is thus a regulatory concept at the border of a global racial, economic, and geographic division of power and legitimacy.

III. Populism as Civilizational Discourse: The Coloniality of Power

Aníbal Quijano (1998) traces the historical origins of the term populism to the nineteenth century Populist Party in the United States, a predominantly agrarian organization and movement that fought fluctuations in crop prices, and the Russian *narodniki* of the 19th century. In the US, ‘populism’ was conceptually elaborated early on by Thorstein Veblen (1894) to describe the politics of “an intellectually undisciplined populace” susceptible to demagogic manipulation (459). The *narodniki*, a peasant movement – or better, a movement of the intelligentsia, including a young Leon Trotsky, who idealized the Russian peasant as a revolutionary subject (Deutscher 2003) – the of the 1860s and 70s, responded to Russia’s tortured transition from feudal society to more fully consolidated capitalist logics of ownership and production. Knowledgeable of and known to socialist and anarchist thought of the day, the *narodniki* conceived of the peasantry as a truly revolutionary class, capable of propelling Russia to Socialism without passing through the ‘stages’ of economic and political development (Quijano 1998, 174-176). José Aricó (2010) ascribes this stagism and developmentalism to the “Hegelian glasses” through which Marx and then with increasing orthodoxy and Eurocentrism, Marxists, viewed the politics of peoples “without history” (118). That is, regardless of the degree to which Marx was or was not able to extract the ‘rational kernel’ from Hegelian philosophy, the geo-historical

and progressive stagism of the latter's Philosophy of History has marked significant tendencies within *Marxist* (perhaps, as distinct from *Marx's*) thought.⁸⁰

These nineteenth century populisms illustrate two important ways in which the term has always been loaded with normative meaning, long before its incorporation into the conceptual and theoretical arsenals of the contemporary social sciences. In Veblen's case, populism betrays a fear of the unwashed masses, 'the people' – a rather common preoccupation of his age. Just one year later, Gustave Le Bon's highly influential *The Crowd* was published in Paris,⁸¹ a study that articulated the growing anxieties and preoccupations of emerging 'mass psychology.' Le Bon's basic thesis, that when combined in a mass, individuals (no matter how critical, learned, or dispassionate they may be in isolation) de-evolve from civilization to barbarism, is indicative of Veblen's concern of the two-sided deterioration of the US polity expressed in his entry on populism. This aspect – fear or distrust of the (often newly enfranchised or mobilized) masses, without the mediating, mitigating, and *disciplining* power of established institutions – informs most subsequent and contemporary theorizations of populism in Latin American politics.

In this way we can also see more generally how discourses *about* populism betray a fundamental anxiety on the part of constituted power about constituted power. What is registered perhaps above all else when the specter of populism is

⁸⁰ On the debate of Marxism's stagist understanding of history and its implications for colonized and recently liberated nations, see among others see Kevin Anderson's (2010) *Marx at the Margins* and, classically, Eric Wolf's (2010) *Europe and the People without History*.

⁸¹ *The Crowd* was subsequently translated to English in 1896.

evoked is that something is out of order. A dangerous, unstable, and potentially disruptive element has entered the picture. The social contract may not be able to hold all parties to their initial agreement. The multitude may break free.

In other words, concern with the destabilizing effects of populism is entirely unfounded. Populisms at their core are seen to foster and build on an already existing antagonism to a given order, usually one in which the majority of the population is excluded from the exercise and enjoyment of power. Ferenc Szasz (1982) notes that populism, in its various iterations in United States history, “behind everything...spoke for the politics of frustration against the bigness and impersonality of an Established System” (211). However, the uncertainty of the outcome of any resulting ‘anti-systemic movement,’ the lack of settled platforms or ideologies, and the demagogic nature of many populist leaders made many contemporary and current observers of populism in the US highly skeptical of its ability to make good on lasting reforms – regardless of the worthiness of the cause.

While both the United States and Latin America have shared experiences with populism since breaking with colonial rule, the comparative longevity and impacts of nineteenth and twentieth century populisms have differed greatly. George Yúdice (2004) highlights race as *the* key differentiating factor among US and Latin American populisms. This in part has to do with the differential ways in which race and discourses about race circulated through the early nation-building projects in each respective postcolony. In the case of Spanish America, independence and emancipation came at the same time, resulting in mestizo republics and an ‘idea of

Latin America' that either selectively valorized (often, largely apocryphal) elements of the indigenous past or jumped with both feet into the developmentalist race to become Europe (on the latter, and for a critique of postcolonial creole nationalisms in Latin America, see Mignolo 2005; on the former, for perhaps the most famous proposal for the positive eugenics of *mestizaje*, see Vasconcelos 1997).

In the United States, independence from Great Britain was accompanied by the inscription of racialized chattel slavery into the nation's founding documents, relegating a significant portion of the population (and the majority in some Southern states) to the status of inhuman until the mid-nineteenth century Civil War. A key difference between early United States' populisms is thus that they "did not draw their definition of national identity from an equivalent miscegenated imaginary, as in almost all Latin American countries. The failure to incorporate blacks, especially in working class struggles, meant that populism could be only partial rather than a national universal. One might say that apartheid has undermined any possibility of a national-popular in the United States" (Yúdice 2003, 69). After a brief 'democratic spring' during reconstruction (ending by 1877), the United States devolved into something resembling apartheid *avant la lettre*, fragmenting and retarding the potential 'national-popular' from which populisms might have emerged (Du Bois 1998).

Finally, these racial characteristics of each respective early republican moment took place in different institutional settings, further shaping the texture of populism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The early experiences in the United States occurred first in the context of westward expansion and war with Mexico, then after

the Civil War in the consolidation of the power of the central state. The nineteenth century in Latin America was characterized first by civil war and balkanization under local caudillos and then by neocolonialism under British hegemony (Lynch 1992). As a result, populism in the United States would be much more rural, agrarian, and white – a powerful political force in some of the Midwestern and Great Plains states – but never a national movement. In Latin America the movements came for the most part with *fin du siècle* urbanization and the transition away from the agrarian economic base of the *latifundios* and the advent of mass democracy. More provocatively, by the time of what I would describe as Latin America's first viable democratization in the early twentieth century, the book on democracy in the United States had already been closed by Jim Crow laws and party machine politics. Populism was the cipher through which these experiences were (and continue to be) read.

From a different angle, Soviet 'scientific' concerns with populism – or *narodnikism* – center on its ostensible distraction from the *real* path to socialism. Especially during the Stalinist phases of the movement, the Communist International reformulated Marxist-Leninism into a 'science' of history and historical change, deviation from which was grounds for expulsion from the movement and party or worse. In this context, *narodnikism* came to signify any revolutionary movement that failed to follow the urban, industrial, and developmentalist model of socialism exemplified by the Soviet Union.⁸² Along with Trotskyism and Anarchism, it was one

⁸² This position does not ignore the fact that the USSR itself emerged from a largely peasant-agrarian context. Rather, it demands that the high road to socialism could *only* be that of industrial development under the leadership of the party of the

of the Stalinists' favorite discrediting adjectives, tantamount to accusing one of nothing short of bourgeois romanticism. Such was the fate of the Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui. Mariátegui was accused of *narodnikism* by the Comintern for articulating Indigeneity and anti-imperialist struggle as well as his (at the time) heterodox economic views on capitalist and feudal modes of production in the Americas (Mariátegui 2009; Aníbal Quijano 1998, 1998). In this way populism served less as a substantive or descriptive term than it did an accusation of heresy.

We can thus appreciate a central function of discourses about populism from either liberal-bourgeois or Orthodox Marxist perspectives. As a concept, populism is almost without exception deployed by partisans within these traditions in an either disparaging or antagonistic manner, and usually contains within it explicit or implicit understandings of race. Populism represents a threat to the established order, the specter of the racially impure masses penetrating genteel society. It is also seen to pose a detour along the road of historical progress, a consequence of incorrect thinking and false consciousness. Populism, then, is backwards, a step away from modern civilization and back towards barbarism and tradition, the shared enemy of developmentalist capitalism and scientific socialism.

From the perspective of the colonality of power, then, populism represents the danger of inverting or even dismantling a globally racial division of labor, wealth, and legitimacy. Even after over a decade in office, this anxiety around racialized hierarchies can be seen on an almost daily basis in the Venezuelan Opposition print

industrialized proletariat. This is, of course, one of the chief points of contention between the Stalin and Mao.

media. Images of the president emphasize his nonwhite features, often explicitly depicting him as a half-man, half-ape demagogue (on contemporary racism in Venezuela, see also Herrera Salas 2005). This liminal or semi-human status extends beyond simple racism directed against Venezuela's first nonwhite president. As I have suggested in this section, the subjectivities implied in discourses about populism – that is, the constituencies of the populist leaders – are replaced by oversimplified, dehumanized mobs.

III. Populism and Economics: From Import Substitution to the Lost Decades

In this section I consider conceptualizations of populism that place economic policy at the core. However, it is worth noting at the outset that, with the exception of the economists I address in the final parts of this section, these 'classical' accounts of populism also locate in it a distinct set of political practices (forging of multi-class coalitions, rhetorical antagonism, captive civil society – to name only a few). I include these conceptualizations under the rubric of 'economic' populism because they see economic policy as *the* defining substance of populism. Thus, to foreshadow a bit, for these political scientists populism rests on questions of economic policy – e.g., wage increases for urban workers and land reform for peasants – rather than on antagonistic rhetoric, the personalism of the national executive, or any particular discursive framing of politics (though these latter elements are also often present).

In a critical essay Ian Roxborough (1984) provides a useful characterization of populism's place within the larger narrative of 'modal' theories of Latin American

‘development.’ According to developmentalist accounts of Latin American history, the economic policies of the years prior to the Great Depression were defined by primary product export economies in the ‘peripheral’ states of Latin America. Accordingly, political power was the purview of the oligarchs and *caudillos* (strongman) at the top of these usually quite vast agrarian empires. Political movements in this era were by and large comprised of middle class elements pressing for increased political and economic liberalization. From the 1930s to the late 1960s in the larger economies of the region, the national bourgeoisie (and especially urban-based industrial entrepreneurs) had by and large consolidated their hold on power through the use of Import Substituting Industrialization (ISI) and expansive multi-class and largely (though not exclusively) urban populist coalitions.

Many political scientists blame ISI policies for triggering the military coups that followed every example of early and mid-twentieth century ‘classical’ populism. According to this line of analysis the early or ‘easy’ stages of ISI encouraged unrealistically high expectations of upward mobility among newly urbanized populations, forcing leaders into impossible choices between social stability and social order. Guillermo O’Donnell (1973), writing specifically about the Argentine and Brazilian cases, notes once the ‘easy stage’ of ISI was exhausted, its failure to bring ‘horizontal’ (that is, multisector and non-state directed) industrialization produced a foreign currency crunch that only exacerbated popular demands on weakened civilian governments. As the harder-to-contain mobilization of ‘the masses’ increased (harder to contain in that their demands were increasingly difficult to meet, triggering still

more frustration), so too did the discontent of middle classes with the compromises forged in populist coalitions. These regimes thus were replaced by a “vertical industrialization” which “depended more and more on capital, and technology transfers from abroad and the increasing penetration of technocratic roles” typical of foreign-owned firms (62). In this way, the “law and order appeals” of emerging ‘Bureaucratic Authoritarian’ regimes – in which *efficiency* took the place of *nationalism* as the orienting principle of economic policy – rolled back the gains made by popular sectors that participated in populist coalitions. In sum, populist-authoritarian *inclusion* triggered and was replaced by Bureaucratic-Authoritarian *exclusion* (89).⁸³

The ostensible ‘heyday’ of Classical Latin American populism thus started with production booms during the Second World War and came into full bloom in its aftermath.⁸⁴ It was more often than not associated with dependent development theories that prescribed ISI as a model for quick economic growth. For Gino Germani (1973), this “ideology of industrialization” was embodied in the creation of a ‘national-popular’ by authoritarian, ideologically hybrid, and nationalistic movements that, he alleges, arise whenever the demographic need for integration exceeds the

⁸³ For regional overviews along these lines, see Halperín Donghi (1993), Skidmore and Smith (2001) and the edited volume by Coniff (1999b).

⁸⁴ Such accounts of populism’s ‘classical’ period are characterized by Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico (1934-40), Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina (especially his first span in office, 1946-55), Getulio Vargas in Brazil (1930-45 and 1951-54), José María Velasco Ibarra in Ecuador (1944-47), Victor Paz Estenssoro in Bolivia (1952-56 and 1960-64), the *Alianza Popular Revolucionaria de America* (APRA) of Victor Haya de la Torre in Peru (founded in 1924, though never in power until the election of Alan García in 1985), and Acción Democrática (AD) in Venezuela (especially under Romulo Betancourt from 1959-64 and Carlos Andrés Pérez in 1974-79 and 1989-1993).

capacity of existing social, political and economic institutions (29-30). Populism is in this sense an economically determined – and hence cyclical – crisis and response in the context of dependent development (14-15). Until the 1970s and 1980s, when theories of dependent development fell out of fashion, it was thought by observers that populism and structural-statist development were inextricably linked, perhaps even synonymous in the Latin American context, and that both had been rendered obsolete by the neoliberal turn (Conniff 1999a). The “relatively easy stage of import substitution,” having been exhausted, combined with shifts in global trends of production and consumption, and most importantly the strain tightening resources placed on the often-expansive populist coalitions signaled populism’s end (Demmers, Fernández Jilberto, and Hogenboom 2001, 5).

These coalitions, Torcuato DiTella (1965) asserts, allow new elites to attain economic and political power with the help of the ‘disposable’ masses through their shared “passionate hatred of the status quo” especially of the oligarchy, or ‘traditional’ agricultural elites and landowners (50). Populism is thus in this light the result of economically determined contradictions. That is to say, economic development produced *both* a new class of potential elites excluded from the exercise of power by traditional oligarchs *and* an excess of displaced, increasingly urbanized and under-employed (or under-satisfied) *masses* – both of which held aspirations of upward mobility. While populist parties for DiTella took various forms – from moderate examples like the Institutional Party of the Revolution (PRI for its initials in Spanish) in Mexico to the Gamal Abdel Nasser’s civic-military alliance in Egypt, the archetype

for populism against which all other cases must draw defining power is that of *Peronismo* in Argentina (74).⁸⁵ From a slightly different angle, the economic definition of populism and the legacy of the *Peronista* model can be seen in Jorge Castañeda's (2006) characterization of the Bolivarian Revolution that focuses squarely on Hugo Chávez. Castañeda contends that the so-called 'pink tide' of left and center-left electoral victories in early twenty first century Latin America represent throwbacks or resurgences of classical populism rather than the emergence of new phenomena. In this regard, he is worth quoting at length:

The leftist leaders who have arisen from a populist, nationalist past with few ideological underpinnings – Chávez with this military background, [former Argentine president Nestor] Kirchner with his Peronista roots, [Bolivian president Evo] Morales with his coca-leaf growers' militancy and agitprop [...] *have proved much less responsive to modernizing influences*. For them, rhetoric is more important than substance, and the fact of power is more important than its responsible exercise. The despair of poor constituencies is a tool rather than a challenge, and taunting the United States trumps promoting their countries' real interests in the world. The difference is obvious: *Chávez is not Castro; he is Perón with oil*. Morales is not an indigenous Che; he is a skillful and irresponsible populist [...] Kirchner is a true-blue Peronista, and proud of it.

For all of these leaders, economic performance, democratic values, programmatic achievements, and good relations with the United States are not imperatives but bothersome constraints that miss the real point. They are more intent on maintaining popularity at any cost, picking as many fights with as possible with Washington, and getting as much control as they can over sources of revenue, including oil, gas, and suspended foreign-debt payments (38, *emphasis added*).

Castañeda's comments reflect in economic and political terms a coloniality of power and naturalization of key elements of developmentalism. He refers to *Peronismo* as

⁸⁵ Foreshadowing an argument that will be dealt with in the next chapter, Jon Beasley-Murray (2011) argues that *Peronismo* in Argentina is also the inspiration behind both Ernesto Laclau's conceptualization of politics as well as his attempted détournement of Populism for radical democratic ends.

the paradigmatic case of populism, and in turn recognizes populism as a variant of the left, but one that renders a dismissible family resemblance to *serious* if dated leftisms like the Cuban Revolution. The Bolivarian Revolution is explained in the language of resource-exceptionalism, wherein the social transformations taking place today in Venezuela are tied to oil markets, meaning the process cannot be exported or replicated elsewhere. Consumption has been democratized, but only to ensure the future of Chávez's rule, not to help the population. Populism is also here depicted as non- or even anti-modern, and in terms of international recognition, a regime's viability or 'responsibility' is gauged by its willingness to prioritize servicing of the foreign debt over domestic concerns. Finally, Castañeda's discourse reinforces developmentalism's insularity of national cultures and economies through his depiction of the United States' role in populisms as either a victim unduly picked on by boorish and power-hungry demagogues or an innocuous and rhetorically manipulated patsy for immature populists. The possibility that the United States might be an actual threat to regimes like that of the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela never enters into Castañeda's account.

Conceptualizations of populism that emphasize this sort of economic unorthodoxy persist to this day, at times in a rather orthodox iteration. Populism is identified with retrograde, backwards, and irresponsible economics. It is associated with bloated bureaucracies, corruption, and inefficient state-owned enterprises. As development economics shifted in the 1970s to neoliberal theory – and later the 'Washington Consensus' and an emphasis on microlending and the 'Non-

Governmental Organization-ification’ of grant programs – populism was seen to be an artifact of the past (see most typically Dornbusch and Edwards 1990; Sachs 1985). Finally, populism’s fiscal ‘irresponsibilities,’ as we have seen, were deemed conditions of possibility for the bloody social upheavals and dictatorships of the mid-twentieth century. Venezuela, as we shall see in the following chapter, was in many ways ahead of this trend.

These particular economic conceptions, however, fail to adequately account for the persistence of populism in the analysis of Latin America throughout the late twentieth century. During this time, neoliberal economic policies were all but ubiquitous and increasingly served as preconditions to the international aid which was increasingly in need throughout the ‘lost decades’ of the 1980s and 1990s. As such, narrowly focused economic definitions not only fails to serve political scientists who saw populism in these neoliberal years, they also carry “significant normative baggage” (Knight 1998, 243). That is, they operate, as is the case for Castañeda and the Hayekian economists, as arguments for structural adjustment programs justified through the well-worn derogatory, noneconomic, rhetorical notion of populism.

Three conclusions of particular interest for this chapter emerge at the end of this consideration of economic populisms. The first concerns the way in which phenomena labeled populist trigger anxieties among proponents of ‘free market’ economics as much as they do among socialists. For the former, economically populist policies place too much of a constraint on the actions of private enterprise. At the very least, they are seen as a first step in the direction of centralized planning. The critique

of the socialists sees populist economics as ultimately benefitting the local bourgeoisie (at the expense of comprador sectors and the traditional rural oligarchs) more so than the domestic working class. This tendency has been proven again and again for the socialists in the implosions of populist governments in, for example, Argentina under Perón and the Venezuela of AD.⁸⁶ In both cases, when forced to choose between workers and owners, either the populist figureheads themselves or significant power brokers in their coalitions always consistently chose to serve the interests of the bosses.

Secondly, the perceived irresponsibilities of the populists lent themselves to the call for a rule by experts characteristic of ‘post-political’ neoliberalism. Here, proponents of neoclassical economics contend that populists sowed the seeds of their own demise in the politicization of the economy. If politics has to do with conflict and disagreement, the extent to which the populists rendered the economy a zone of contestation was, for pro-market forces, unacceptable. Put differently, populists at least put the question of the market’s subjugation to social forces other than the profit motive ‘on the table.’ In response the partisans of what we now call neoliberalism organized a full frontal assault on the social democratic state, resorting in many cases to military rule to protect the market from interference. They replaced logics of state and society with that of the market. In the aftermath of military rule and in order to maintain optimum conditions for business, politics has increasingly been replaced with administration, social and collective problems have increasingly been privatized, ‘national’ and ‘state’ interests have been made secondary to trade, and police and

⁸⁶ The case of Perón and Acción Democrática are considered more fully in the following chapter.

security functions increasingly replace those of the state's former responsibility to internally develop its population.⁸⁷

If the first and second conclusions drawn from economic populism mark it as an anxiety-producing phenomenon and a trigger for the wave of a now global neoliberalism, the final lesson of economic populism to draw from this account is the degree to which it cannot be separated from politics. That is to say, populism is also (if not primarily) concerned with question of style, dynamics between leaders and led, policy, and social identity. I treat the two in semi-isolation in this chapter for heuristic reasons, but also due to the fact that the political reclamation of populism carried out by Ernesto Laclau I address in the following chapter is both squarely political and all but completely silent on questions of political economy. While Laclau is forced into this relation to the mode of production in his drive to escape the economism of previous generations of Latin American Marxism, he consequently reinforces the notion that politics and the economy can and must be separated, a notion that is central to modern liberalism. While I have attempted in this section to highlight the 'purely economic' expressions of twentieth century populism, I have been unable to do so without touching upon the very political origins and consequences of such expressions. Similarly, any consideration of *political populism* ignores economic

⁸⁷ I draw these elements of 'post-politics' through an inverse reading of Jacques Rancière's (2010) *Ten Theses on Politics* and an extension of Enrique Dussel's (2006) *20 Tesis de Política*. This concept, its implications for Venezuela throughout the late twentieth century to the present, and the degree to which the Bolivarian Revolution has countered the 'postpolitical' trend that characterized 'globalization' is the primary concern of the fifth chapter of this dissertation.

questions at the risk of performing its own theoretical irrelevance. It is to this question that I now turn.

IV. Populism as Politics, Politics as Pathos

Populism proved more malleable than the state-led development regimes it first described in Latin America. As early as 1982 populism was being retheorized in order to adapt it to new circumstances. Here, populism was increasingly seen as evidence of “the ingenuity of Latin American politicians in devising temporary solutions to the crises of underdevelopment and in breathing new life into ostensibly moribund institutions and approaches should [that] never be underestimated” (Drake 1982, 244). Indeed, with the emergence of seemingly populist yet surprisingly neoliberal (the polar opposite of structural-statist development) leaders in the 1980s and 1990s such as Carlos Andrés Pérez in Venezuela, Alberto Fujimori in Perú, and Carlos Menem in Argentina, a new category, ‘neopopulism’ had to be devised (Barr 2003; Philip 1998; Weyland 2003). Going one step further, some have suggested the *necessity* of linking populist political *style* and *strategy* with the seemingly *unpopulist* economics of structural adjustment, ‘shock therapy,’ and the ‘Washington Consensus.’ Kurt Weyland (1999) goes so far as to suggest that the *neopopulists*, as dangerous as they were to fragile Latin American democracies, were the only figures capable of pulling their countries through the difficult transitions required by the economic and political constraints of post Cold War globalization. Neopopulists are protectors of the social order in the face of pending catastrophe; classical conceptualizations of populism are from this vantage point guilty of an economism that is incapable of

recognizing the *real* threat or function of populism by relegating political strategy to a secondary order of importance.

In this section I outline the central aspects and limitations of ‘political’ populism. In the previous section I argued that ‘classical’ conceptualizations placed disproportionate emphasis on the economic aspects of populism and thereby contributed to a global social classification and stratification whereby populist economics render national economies ‘behind the times.’ In this section I argue that overemphasis on an ostensibly ‘political’ populism is based in a normative investment in the procedures and mediations of representative liberal democracy. However, as with the previous section’s emphasis on ostensibly economic definitions of populism, so too do the ‘political’ forms imply a particular economic agenda. This is often illustrated in studies of contemporary Venezuela, where it is often unclear if the Bolivarian Revolution’s biggest transgression against the contemporary global order is president Chávez’s fiery rhetoric against local and international elites or his government’s pro-poor fiscal policies and aid programs. Either way, characterizing the Bolivarian Revolution as ‘populist’ has the effect of shifting the source of its legitimacy from Venezuelan voters to international experts and officials. It is thus not only the Chávez regime that is in need of observation and containment, but also the poor Venezuelans who when given the opportunity, made the wrong use of democracy (see, for example, Corrales and Penfold-Becerra 2007; Seligson 2007; Tanaka 2006).

The affinity between neopopulism and neoliberalism in the 1990s, according to Kurt Weyland (1996), “while...not an historical necessity...is more than an historical accident” (6). Especially in the context of post-dictatorship democracies “democratic politics stimulated the revival of [classical economic] populism, yet economic constraints appeared to condemn it to death.” In the aftermath of the economic catastrophes of the early 1980’s successors to these regimes made a turnaround, using “political populism to impose economic liberalism, and in turn used economic liberalism to strengthen their populist leadership” (9). Economics and politics thus remain intensely intertwined, however in the case of neopopulism economics are rendered variable while politics and political styles remain constant.

The neopopulists shared a number of stylistic traits in common with their predecessors. They made direct, often televised appeals to the unorganized masses, specifically targeting the growing urban informal sectors of the population. They all presented themselves as representatives of the *pueblo* and railed against the *vendepatria* political classes of the old-system that brought ruin to their countries. In this regard, political scientists have argued that the outsider status and political inexperience of many neopopulists – most notably, Alberto Fujimori in Peru and of course Chávez in Venezuela – was perceived by their electorates to be a virtue rather than a liability (on this, see Barr 2009; K. Roberts 1995).

Kenneth Roberts (1995) examines the emergence of neopopulism in Fujimori’s Peru and notes the “elasticity” of populism as a concept – an elasticity that renders the concept potentially bereft of explanatory value. He thus proposes to

‘disaggregate’ populist phenomena in order to “identify populist subtypes that share a ‘family resemblance’ and manifest some but not all of the core attributes” (88). These core attributes are by and large political in nature, though they incorporate economic aspects ranging from widespread redistributive measures to more individually (or smaller group)-targeted and clientelist practices.⁸⁸ These economic plans are themselves political in that they are deployed instrumentally towards the end of “creat[ing] a material foundation for popular sector support” (88). While this does not necessarily translate into a vote-buying scheme, the implication nonetheless remains. Roberts’ approach thus allows for a reconceptualization of populism that emphasizes political rather than economic factors *and* allows for a multiplicity of political practices to be identified as populist. In this regard he, like Weyland, sees a mutually supporting political logic between classical populist practices and economic neoliberalism’s

⁸⁸ According to Jonathan Fox (1994), clientelism is a “form of bargaining” with unequal constraints on the autonomy of the negotiating parties in which the resulting “imbalanced bargaining relations require the enduring political subordination of clients and are reinforced by the threat of coercion. Such subordination can take various forms, ranging from vote buying by political machines, as under semicompetitive electoral regimes, to a strict prohibition on collective action, as under most military regimes, to controlled mass mobilization, as in communist or authoritarian populist systems” (153). ‘Clientelism’ is thus another way of characterizing the ‘less than democratic’ forms democracy often takes. Central to this notion is that an exchange takes place in patron-client relations, where the individual ‘client’ trades its political autonomy in the form of votes to the ‘patron,’ who buys loyalty with various and sundry forms of political, economic, and social benefits. However, in a critical treatment, Auyero (2000) notes that while clientelism is no doubt a form of socio-political control and cultural domination (58), the lack of attention to the ‘everyday practice’ of clientelism and the role it plays in identity formation remain deep lacunae within the literature. In reality, several other factors (information-hoarding, access to third parties, intensity of patron-broker-client relation) significantly mitigate the *direct* vote-for-favor relation often depicted in the majority accounts of clientelism (75).

“predilection for autocracy” (114). Both phenomena *by necessity* work to dismantle state or organized civil society actors that would resist the social and economic transformation populist political rule and neoliberal economics promise.

Two final examples of the literature on populism in Venezuela should help elucidate the nature of populism’s neoliberal revision:

When Carlos Andrés Pérez took office for the second time in 1989 many analysts considered it a straightforward return of a classical populist. Andrés Pérez’s campaign centered on two, largely symbolic, pillars. The first was the widespread identification of him *personally* with the flush years of the 1970’s oil boom, when Venezuela was often referred to as *Venezuela Saudita* (Saudi Venezuela). This was a time when Venezuelans were notorious among Latin American countries for their extravagant Miami shopping junkets, and the country was urbanizing and industrializing at a breakneck pace.⁸⁹ All this, however, changed with the international currency crisis and the response of the (ostensibly) state oil company, *Petroleos de Venezuela* (PDVSA), which actively sought to speed up the flow of capital *from* Venezuela (Mommer 2003, 134; Wilpert 2007, 90–93).⁹⁰ Andrés Pérez’s campaign effectively triggered the memory of Venezuelans still reeling from the (with

⁸⁹ In an interview conducted in 2007, one Venezuelan described the general sentiment of these years in terms of a widespread belief that you had to ‘try *not* to make money.’

⁹⁰ This is, for example, the moment in which PDVSA began purchasing a series of foreign petroleum companies and distributors – such as CITGO in the United States – in order to tie up liquid capital *beyond the reach* of any subsequent Venezuelan administrations.

hindsight, comparatively mild) ‘corrective’ programs instituted throughout the early 1980s.

The second aspect of Andrés Pérez’s campaign was an active, often crudely posed and directly nationalist attack on international institutions. He described the IMF as “*la bomba sola-mata-gente*” (the bomb that only kills people) and effectively transformed his image from that of a corrupt politician who had in many ways paved the ground for the disaster of the 1980s to the only person capable of bringing the decade and its crises to a close (quoted in Coronil 1997, 375). However, upon taking office he immediately announced a series of structural adjustment reforms that immediately triggered a violent popular reaction. In the resulting *Caracazo* or *Sacudón*, anywhere from 300 to 3,000 people were violently repressed by the Police, National Guard, and Armed Forces in the capital and throughout the country.

‘El gran viraje’ (the big turn around), as Pérez labeled his shift from ‘classical’ to neoliberal populist has been read in a number of ways. For the government at the time, his shift was seen as the necessary, responsible thing to do; the government needed to swallow the bitter pill of the newly established global economic orthodoxy, lest it doom itself to underdevelopment. For the left, Pérez’s moves amount to little more than a ‘bait and switch’ typical of the state’s privileging the already privileged. Further fuel for this argument came as the ‘opening’ of the Venezuelan economy of the 1990s. Communications, mineral processing, and significant portions of the oil industry were wholly or partially privatized. Venezuela worked to undermine OPEC’s ability to regulate prices of oil by flooding the market – the result of which was a

record decline in gas prices in the US and an increasingly lower rate of return for the Venezuelan state on oil sales (Coronil 1997).

From either perspective, then, neopopulism is seen as a political technology that facilitates the transition to neoliberal austerity by convincing – if only temporarily – populations to support policies that run against their own material interests. However accurately this might describe the actions and intent of Pérez and other so-called ‘neopopulists’ this phenomenon is significantly more widespread than the selective geographic deployment of populism’s conceptual apparatus would suggest. For example, in the United States Bill Clinton was both widely popular (for a US president), shmoozingly ‘down-home-y’ (the rags-to-riches biography, the saxophone, the rumored love of chili dogs), and the architect of accelerations of the de-industrialization of the US economy and the dismantling of the welfare state. Similar descriptions could be made for Tony Blair and ‘New Labor’ in England. In other words, why not describe these leaders as neopopulists rather than as the architects of the ‘new global economy’? Perhaps the distinction has to do with the capacity of the leaders in question to effectively ‘sell’ their programs, that is, on the acquiescence of the populations to the changes deemed necessary by the commanding heights of the economy. Neopopulism, thus understood, is the mark of *failure*. Better, neopopulism betrays the anxiety of an observer around the capacity of constituted power in a given ‘case’ to contain and control constituent power. Or even better still, until recently, populism didn’t happen in the US.

More recently, Javier Corrales and Michael Penfold (2011) have characterized the Bolivarian Revolution as a 'hybrid' and populist regime, both of which they identify through analysis of Hugo Chávez. For them populism is "Latin America's long-standing practice of deploying state resources to weaken institutions that mediate between the state and society, presumably in the interest of the common people." Thus, for them, the Bolivarian Revolution amounts to little more than "Chávez's version of populism [that] both emulates and modernizes the traditional Latin American model of populism" (137). As a hybrid regime, the Bolivarian Revolution moves between recognizable ideological positions and institutional formations, existing in "an 'in-between' position, a 'gray zone' in which rulers introduce autocratic practices without totally abolishing democratic institutions, particularly free elections" (138).

Corrales and Penfold use the metaphor of a dragon to explain the hybrid, neopopulist, and less than democratic nature of the Bolivarian Revolution. By equating the Bolivarian process with Chávez, and by depicting Chávez as a dragon, politics in Venezuela are rendered dangerous and unpredictable, inhuman, exotic, and mythical. The Bolivarian Revolution is thus not only not like the liberal democracies with which the authors are most familiar and comfortable, it is unlike and a threat to anything real, human, or recognizable. Hybridity is, for Corrales and Penfold, a sign of contagion and threat.

Corrales and Penfold's take on Bolivarian Venezuela and populism more generally nicely summarizes, if hyperbolically, what I have argued throughout this

chapter: discourses about populism seek to contain and neutralize nonliberal democratic formations. Discourses about populism rely on a singular definition of democracy, and do so in the case of Venezuela following developmentalism and coloniality. Above and beyond this regulatory framework, these approaches explicitly or implicitly sanction a relation to difference in terms of antagonism, superiority, or inferiority between the presumed I and the exteriorized other. They thus take a potentially horizontal taxonomy of political forms and not only rank them in terms of legitimacy, but in terms of threat as well. If there is one positive geopolitical consequence of the crisis of neoliberalism and its aftermath, as I will argue in the fifth chapter of this dissertation, it is that these imperial gestures are making themselves increasingly and increasingly obviously absurd.

V. Conclusion: Others, Dragons, and Coloniality

In this chapter I have examined discourses about populism in Latin America as a global regulatory framework that renders certain political experiences legitimate, and others in need of correction or containment. From the perspective of the social science authors considered here, populism represents an economic recklessness that fails to live up to the standards established at the commanding heights of the global order. For authors from the social sciences as well as those from an orthodox Marxist-inflected position, populist politics are something of a substanceless surface, a spectacle that for both camps amounts to a manipulation of the masses' false consciousness.

Historical or Classical populism are at their most basic an ‘ideology of development’ that seeks to unify the interests of labor and capital, often against an internal *ancien régime* and/or and externally-menacing enemy. While social science accounts tend to dismiss these attributes as paranoid and calculating, Marxist attempts contend that this sort of move amounts to collaborating with the enemy class.⁹¹ Later the concept was used to explain the emergence of outsider candidates running on ‘fight the system’ platforms, albeit this time accompanied by an economic program of structural adjustment, austerity, and neoliberal discipline. Neopopulists were seen as using a populist political style either to help the ‘swallow the bitter pill’ or to bait-and-switch the dimwitted masses. In either case, these discourses *about* populism fail to adequately consider populism as anything other than pathological – a detour from political and economic development in the modern/colonial world system.

A key concern that circulates around discourses on both classical and neopopulism has to do with the extent to which they break with the institutional makeup of representative democracy. Here the centralization of power in the

⁹¹ There is of course something of an irony here, considering the stagist developmentalism of most Latin American communist parties. The limitations and consequences of this economistic approach were perhaps most starkly illustrated in the Bolivian Communist Party’s hand in the betrayal of Che Guevara’s expedition in that country. Given the emphasis on industrialization and the idealized vanguard role of the proletariat in most Latin American Communist Parties’ official doctrine, it would stand to reason that they would have signed on to populism as an ‘ideology of development,’ even if only in bad faith. Perhaps it was the virulent anti-communism of most populists and their eventual return in the late twentieth century to Washington’s sphere of influence that led Latin American communists to identify populism with fascism rather than the shining path to socialism.

executive is often cited as the highest concern, but so too are (particularly social science) authors alarmed at what they see as a rule by plebiscite and the squeezing out of the bureaucratic authority that has historically been seen as necessary for the functioning of the modern nation-state. Direct democracy is in other words depicted as an example of democracy posing a threat to itself as *stability* is privileged as the most important criteria on which regimes can be judged.

Populism can also be approached as a liminal or crisis concept. It has been theorized in terms of a politics that dwells in the gaps between established norms. In the classical sense it was seen to be an ‘ideology of industrialization,’ occupying the moment of transition or becoming, a shift between social forms, and accordingly, between privileged social agents (from latifundistas and peasants to the national bourgeoisie and proletariat or, in the case of neopopulists, in the context of global financial restructuring and the social upheavals of the 1980s-2000s). Here populism is understood instrumentally, evaluated on the degree to which it does or does not advance a ‘national society’ along the path of (exogenously defined and often imposed) development.

This leads to another key consequence of discourses about populism noted in this chapter: insofar as the concept is used to define exceptional phenomena, it serves to illustrate what counts as normal economic and social functions through what it *lacks*. These lacking elements effectively make experiences lumped under the heading of populism illegible for observers steeped in the political culture of the United States

(for example). As a result, difference is inserted into a hierarchical and global division of legitimacy characterized by coloniality.

However, and this argument will be more fully explored in the next chapter, the way in which discourses about populism illustrate and contribute to the coloniality of power also illustrates a key shortcoming of the epistemological paradigm established by the modernity/coloniality group. While it is certainly true that discourses about populism have a built-in if often implicit and rarely openly stated social ontology, it is even more certain that they fail to fully or adequately grasp what takes place within the phenomena identified as populist. Something always escapes these inscriptions of the populist as a conniving demagogue, the masses that he or she controls as passive but dangerously excitable mobs, while all parties involved are either too immature or incapable of recognizing the correct path for their nation. These analytical oversights have a net effect of depicting populisms as deficient, underdeveloped, and backward phenomena.

Revisionist theorizations of populism also fail to address, enhance, or theorize the subjective side of political processes labeled ‘populist.’ Rather than ascending from actually existing social relations, either approach imposes a logic to ‘the political.’ They thus miss, in the Venezuelan case, the way in which precarity, urbanization, a long history of economic interference, and a keen perception of the currently shifting geopolitical balance of power (to name only a few contributing factors) all inform the formation and perceived potential range of action for historic social blocs over and above liberal or agonistic models of democratic practice or virtue. Indeed, among the

most radical Bolivarians, democracy is a mode of existence, but one that is only really experienced in the collective transformation of society and the privileging of the common good over the interests of individuals, capital, or the world market.

Democracy is, in short, constituent power. This is precisely what discourses *about* populism fear: political sequences that pose a threat to constituted power as it exists in the modern/colonial world system. These discourses pathologize nonliberal phenomena as if engaged in a clash of civilizations. They consider partisans of the Bolivarian Revolution to be threats to a global political, economic, and social order organized by and subordinated to the modern/colonial world system.

At the risk of sounding optimistic, they may well be correct.

Chapter Three

The Power of the Many: Populism, the Multitude, and the Bolivarian

Process

Writing in the aftermath of the 2002 countercoup in Venezuela, Roland Denis (2005), a veteran of the revolutionary left in his country, contended:

Chávez the President is...a 'non-place' within the revolutionary process that he leads; a voice without instrument, a project without a subject that cannot negate the institutional power he also commands...

We, the multitude of vandals, of the poor, of proletarians without work, of organized collectives and movements, can begin to understand the tragedy of the 'non-place' of a leader returning to see the active power we have been able to accumulate by our own ability. This is not 'Chavismo sin Chávez' but rather 'Chávez without Chavismo,' which is to say, a leadership that must obey the multitudinous command that supports him (140).

That is, while the uprising that returned Chávez to the presidency in April 2002 could unquestionably be described as supporting the president, its power surpasses this characterization. Denis uses the language of the multitude to highlight the socially excessive nature of this new constitution of forces in Venezuela. Vandals, the unemployed, autonomous movements – all of these articulations are in some way or another excessive from the point of constituted power in that they neither directly produce surplus value nor institutional democratic legitimacy. In fact, under circumstances considered normal in contemporary liberal democracies, uncontrollable social rebellion and unemployment are usually signs of ungovernability and regime-weakness or even failure. In April 2002 these 'excessive' elements once again and forcefully underlined their power.

The tragedy of such a dynamic arises with what Denis considers the inevitability of the leader's return to a situation over which he no longer has control. Something has changed. Once power has been tasted by the multitude, they will not relinquish it willingly. A context in which the leader's charisma rather than ideology or organization was seen as sufficient to ensure his control – why social scientists name populisms for figures rather than ideas: Peronismo in Argentina, Cardenismo in Mexico, and Chavismo in Venezuela – can no longer define the conjuncture. From a *Chavismo* without Chávez to a Chávez without *Chavismo*: the figure of the president and his cult of personality can no longer capture or redirect the energy on which they rely. Rather, it is *Chávez who must take orders* or risk making himself irrelevant to the forces shaping Venezuela. The president, in other words, will have to follow a path of 'facts created on the ground' rather than setting the agenda himself and expecting his 'followers' to dutifully carry out their assigned tasks.

Or perhaps not.

More recently, Denis (2011) has joined a number of leftists lamenting in the growing 'bureaucratization' of the revolution. There is a growing sense that the revolutionary sequence led by the multitude that began in with 1989's *caracazo* reached its apex in the aftermath of the countercoup and reopening of the oil industry in 2002-2003. The fear by 2012 is that this revolutionary opening had closed, if only temporarily. As Sara Motta (2011) notes, rather than observing and contributing to the "organic development and consolidation of popular-class autonomy, creativity, and power" current strategies on the part of the Chávez government have tended to

push for concentration and direction, discipline and order. The result has been a net “sapping [of] the energies of popular politics” (251, both Denis’s and Motta’s comments can be found in Spronk, et al 2011). Even more damningly for the process, perennial problems such as official corruption have become increasingly impossible to ignore. As one activist exclaimed during an impromptu debate I witnessed at a market in Barinas in December 2008, “Aquí hay Chavismo, pero no hay revolución...*todavía*” (“here we have Chavismo, but we *still* don’t have a revolution”).

The ire of the speaker in this instance was all the more emphatic in that Barinas, a state capital in the country’s interior prairie, is the hometown of the President and has been run by his family members since he ascended to the presidency in 1998. While there has been much attention paid to the region – much more than previous administrations, both in terms of government aid as well as private developers hoping to make themselves more visible to the famously *llanero*⁹² president – economic development has not been carried out in an organic or participatory fashion. Indeed, even though the speaker in this particular debate identified himself as a *Chavista*, he vehemently insisted that the *Chavistas* in power in Barinas were ‘a bunch of snakes.’

⁹² As in, from *Los Llanos*, the vast inland prairies that span Venezuela and Colombia. The term *llanero* carries with it a number of rural or cowboy-esque signifiers and identities. *Los Llaneros* is the name given to the rough and tumble cowboys from the sparsely populated *llanos* (plains) of Venezuela. Llaneros were at the time and continue to be associated with a sort of rugged individualism, military acumen (especially in the cavalry) and a general unruliness that has historically made them an anarchic element in Venezuelan politics and society. Most generally, it suggests the brashness or unpolished demeanor that critics and admirers alike see in President Chávez.

How, then, to categorize the Bolivarian Revolution? Do the processes taking place at the state and local levels usually identify – if tensely – with the figure of Hugo Chávez amount to a social revolution? Or, can they be dismissed as populist detours along the path to economic and political development? In the previous chapter I considered the geopolitical function of discourses *about* populisms as symptoms of a fundamental (and usually fundamentally raced and gendered) fear of mass involvement in politics, a global ‘division of legitimacy,’ and a support of the institutions and market-orientation of liberal democracy. Inverting that characterization, this chapter considers the degree to which populism might offer antidotes to social injustices arising from deficiencies in ‘the political.’ While the ‘populisms’ of the last chapter worried about the danger of the many, the ‘populisms’ in the present chapter misplace a hope that it can provide a political logic by which the multitude can meaningfully contribute to and benefit from collective life.

My discussion in the present chapter is by and large animated by a critical engagement with Ernesto Laclau’s (2005) rewriting of populism in *On Populist Reason*. While my distance from Laclau will soon be dealt with in depth, it is nonetheless necessary to admit at the outset that his is one of the more nuanced, thorough, and referenced articulations of populism among both left activists and social scientists in recent memory. While it will be my argument that Laclau does more to reproduce rather than refute, reform, or revolutionize contemporary liberal democracies, it is necessary to first admit that this is a problem borne both of necessity and of the limits of political thought addressed in this dissertation. Just as constituent and constituted

power have been dialectically fused by the legacy of the social contract, naturalizing representation and mediation, so too has Laclau accepted to a large degree the ruling 'logic' of late capitalist (or at least post-cold war) triumphant liberalism. Laclau, in other words, seeks to optimize the fate of progressive elements *within the current representational matrix* rather than explode that matrix itself.

Whereas Laclau offers a discursive account of hegemony that highlights the ways in which differentiated bodies are stitched to other bodies in order to forge the consent necessary for a 'people,' Jon Beasley-Murray (2011) contends that politics have always entailed the production of habit, affect, and life itself (60). He looks to the work of Pierre Bourdieu, and specifically to the latter's conceptualization of the *habitus* in order to diagnose the ways in which social order is secured through the production of forms of life rather than through the stitching together of previously-existing 'demands.' From this perspective, I argue, Laclau's hegemony theory can be seen as conservative and defeatist. Laclau naturalizes the state in its present form, making a virtue of the necessity of action in the present. I suggest that the extent to which the Bolivarian Revolution can be characterized by Laclau's hegemony theory is also the extent to which it fails to live up to its revolutionary potential, falling instead into the false choice between "negotiation or acquiescence" imposed by the modern liberalism's mode of social and political transformation (67).

The chapter develops in three sections. In the first, I outline the concept of populism as it has been used to characterize sequences in which politics are changed by the introduction of the many into a given scene, or in which a group of excluded

demand a change in the status quo. I then move to a consideration of contemporary literatures that build on this eventual rupture of the many into a given social order to draw a generalized theory of democracy and democratic politics. I then conclude with a consideration of Gramsci's notion of hegemony and class struggle, Ernesto Laclau's associated conceptualizations of hegemony theory and populism, and the Bolivarian Revolution. Quite distinct from a new map for politics in the post-Cold War era, I argue that moments in which the Bolivarian process most closely adheres to hegemony theory are also its most conservative.

The red thread linking these sections is a concern with the ostensible promise of populism. Just because populist phenomena signal an inclusion or representation of the needs and demands of the many within a political order that once excluded them, such an inclusion does not necessarily atone for the injustices of the present, nor does it obviate the ethical limits of representation and assimilation. It thus matters little if we consider populism as, drawing from the examples considered in this chapter, an affair having to do with 'the political,' democracy, or semiotics. The matter revolves instead on the question of directionality as introduced above by Roland Denis: is the relation between constituent and constituted power one where the former directs the latter, or one in which institutions attempt to cement, freeze, and deploy the energies of the many? If populism is a form of democracy, then, to what extent can it become multitudinous and to what extent does it recreate and reinforce the constitute power of the modern liberal republic?

I. Populism, the Pueblo, and the Many

Etymologically, the term populism suggests an emphasis or reliance upon the ‘common people,’ resonating with the Latin *populus* (the people, the community) and *pleb* (commoners, masses). Laclau (2005) contends that populist phenomena are those in which the *plebs* posits themselves as the only legitimate *populus*, a discursive maneuver that cleaves a given social totality in two antagonistic camps and establishes the ground for what he considers to be politics itself (81). In Latin America, ‘the people’ of populism or the *pueblo* can arguably be traced to corporatist institutions of Spanish colonial rule (but see also Larraín 1997 for a critique of this Hispanist position). The *pueblo* was something of a passive or silent ‘final instance,’ a source of legitimacy whose authority came from the rational and hierarchical ordering of society. Salamanca School theologians of the seventeenth century Spanish Enlightenment – one of the more benign manifestations of the European Counter Reformation – such as Francisco de Vitoria (1991) and Francisco Suárez (2007) developed a semi-secular basis for political authority in which the *pueblo* played a key, if subservient, role in establishing the legitimacy of a social order. The mass of the population was seen to have a sort of contract with their leaders, and could *theoretically* even justifiably kill a tyrant for failing to act with a view to the common good.

For some, the populisms of the mid-twentieth century were extensions of this dynamic (Lynch 1992; Wiarda 1999), even though they are often considered the political expressions of the transition from agrarian to industrialized civilizations. However, even at this point of social transformation populist formations posited a secularized but still organic conceptualization wherein social order was oriented

towards cohesion and directed by benevolent leaders (see Conniff 1999b). In these formations as in the past, the *pueblo* is limited to indirect participation in the life of the nation. It can be hailed and spoken for, its authority is constantly evoked, and its effects or threats are always lurking, but in the end it remains the instrument of either fate or the leader, or both.

As I illustrated in Chapter One, Enrique Dussel (2006) develops a radically different concept of *pueblo*. He argues that the *pueblo* is the social bloc that is always *both* excluded from the exercise of political power *and* that upon which the social order rests. This contradiction is never ultimately resolved for Dussel. Rather, in Dussel's theorization, the *pueblo* occasionally radicalizes this dual relation of exclusion and extraction, demanding recognition by and inclusion in the dominant social order, which shifts power relations in the *pueblo's* favor, even if only temporarily so (98-99).

Dussel's conceptualization of the *pueblo* offers theoretical insight into why populist coalitions can be seen as means by which a socially 'excessive' class is integrated into the class and racial structures of a given country without causing fundamental or irreversible disruptions. This form of populism might thusly be understood in terms of *recognition* rather than *redistribution*. That is, populism in this way symbolically recognizes and even celebrates the membership and contributions of previously marginalized sectors – the traditionally disenfranchised, working classes and previously conceived of 'undesirable' ethnicities, for example. However, rather than a politics of deep and substantive reform, many who have conceptualized populisms in this fashion depict this recognition and incorporation as a cynical

scheme or manipulation leaders use to gain the support of politically naïve constituencies (Kirk Hawkins and Hansen 2006; Horowitz 1990; Navarro 1982).

Such a diagnosis can cut two ways, however. A more or less Marxist critique argues that the populist presents a false promise to the masses, preventing them from developing a consciousness of their positions and interests as workers. Such a position betrays what the modernity/coloniality approach would refer to as a lingering adherence to the ‘myth of modernity’ that there exists a singular path on which societies must develop as I argued in the previous chapter (E. Dussel 1995; Mignolo 2000). In contemporary Venezuela the right wing reaction to the Bolivarian Revolution has deployed something like this critique *from the other side*, arguing that (especially) Chávez has duped the unwashed and ignorant masses into believing the unbelievable: that they are equal to their betters. For the opposition, the resulting irrational expectation of upward mobility upsets the social order, which many in the opposition believe was peaceful before the hornet’s nest of class war was stirred up by *chavismo* (for a more nuanced version of this narrative, see Kozak Rovero 2008).

I often encountered a rather pronounced illustration of this with middle class Venezuelans who either identified themselves as opponents to the Chávez government or in the ‘ni-ni’ (neither-nor) camp. When asked about what they thought had changed in Venezuela and how they experienced those changes on a daily basis, a surprising number responded along the lines of ‘people are more rude now.’ When asked to clarify, the response of a young (Venezuelan, English-speaking) professional in a German manufacturing firm was typical, “It’s hard to say...but at restaurants,

you know, waiters don't say hello or smile. Or at the store. People are more angry now." Newspaper accounts from around this time (late 2007) often reinforced this general affect, describing for example golfers at one of Caracas's premier country clubs lamenting the fact that caddies were increasingly insubordinate on the green and in the clubhouse. The underlying assertion is that the proper order in Venezuela had somehow been breached, and no matter how calamitous the pre-Chávez years had been economically, politically, and socially, the Bolivarian Revolution has been worse (in the literature, see for example Corrales and Penfold 2011; Kozak Rovero 2008; Marcano 2005).

Gareth Williams (2002) offers a different critique of the population-forming and mobilizing aspects of populism. He argues that the attempt to create a notion of 'the people' by populists throughout the twentieth century excluded just as much as it ostensibly drew bodies into the nation's horizontal community. Drawing of the work of the *Subaltern Studies* collective, he argues that starting with the Great Depression, "what appeared to be at stake in the shaping of modern Latin America was the incorporation, representation, and institutionalization of the individual as *homo nationalis* at the same time as he (but rarely she) was to be instituted as *homo economicus* and *homo politicus*" (4). As such, while populist coalitions may have broadened the field of social inclusion and the national-popular, they did so at the cost of assimilation into the unitary vision of the developmentalist state. Those who did not fit the mold of *the people* – the economically unproductive, the unemployed, the queer, the indigenous, the self-sufficient rural population – would remain excluded from the official life and

imagination of the nation. Thus, for every *pueblo*, there is inevitably produced a subaltern.

This particular residue or inclusion-exclusion dynamic may seem paradoxical in that the core discursive logic of populism is usually considered to set an excluded *pueblo* against the establishment. Put differently, populism is depicted as politicizing a previous order in which a privileged class (also usually racially distinct) naturalized its enjoyment of power and prestige while setting itself as the symbolic representative of the nation. If populism does anything it amends this representation. In a slightly different idiom, it shifts the ground of national culture from the ‘high culture’ of the rich, famous, and few to the quotidian and lived experience of the many: from fine art to folk art, from *haute couture* to pop culture. However, as a politics of antagonism and incorporation, populism selectively confronts certain injustices while reinforcing or creating others – idealizing particular occupations, normalizing gender roles, and a modernizing citizenship regime to escape the ‘backward’ state of the indigenous and mestizo masses (Saldaña-Portillo 2003). These *exclusions* should thus also be seen as disciplinary projects aimed at the biopolitical production of citizens by modern states *tout court* rather than a particularly Latin American phenomenon.⁹³

This is in part what concerns Nadia Urbinati (1998), who sees in populism a dangerous vitalism that crushes difference. For her populism is ultimately inimical to democracy, in that it

⁹³ On the biopolitical function of modern citizenship regimes, see in particular the edited volume by Hanson & Stepputat (2005) and Beatriz González Stephan’s work on literature regimes in late colonial and postcolonial Latin America (2001).

defers the political dialectics among citizens and groups, revokes the mediation of political institutions, and maintains an organic notion of the body politic. The ideology of populism displaces equality for unity and thus opposes social and political pluralism. Its extreme consequence, as the experience of fascism testifies, is to transform a political community into a corporate household-like entity, where class and ideological differences are denied and mastered in the attempt to fulfill the myth of a comprehensive totality of state and society...populism has a deeply statist vocation; it is impatient with government by discussion because it longs for limitless decisionism (110).

Rather than a robust 'civil society,' Urbinati's characterization emphasizes the way in which the populist constituency is posited as an organic whole in which the general will is embodied in the actions of the leader. The assumed co-conspirator of the personalistic ruler is thus the undifferentiated many, unified ideologically by the myth of the national body, antagonistic to difference. For observers like Urbinati, populism is dangerously close to Fascism, vitalism, integralism and any other political system that values the many (however construed) over the individual.

The enemy-other is thus as much the subject of populism as 'the people.' An object of antagonism must be established, against which the *pueblo* can be mobilized. As such, populism depends upon a "Manichean discourse that presents the struggle between the people and the oligarchy as a moral and ethical fight between good and evil, redemption and downfall," in which the categories of 'people' and 'oligarchy' are intentionally fluid and vague (Torre 2000, 140). This horizon of enmity can also be external to the *pueblo*, being expressed in anti-imperialist or nationalist rhetorics, as was the case in the mid twentieth century Venezuelan selectively anti-imperialist populism of *Acción Democrática* (Ellner 1999). There is, however, usually an internal object of antagonism for the populist leader and (usually) his masses. As such, the

populist project tends to be identified with a sort of collective purification and a notion of authenticity inimical to liberal pluralism and modern democracy.

While the construction of the *pueblo* and of a relation of enmity is indeed a powerful tool in discursively mobilizing populations, other theorists of populism are quick to point out that such a tactic is definitive of *all* politics, and hence cannot be considered specific to populism (Alvarez Junco 1994; Benjamín Arditi 2007; Knight 1998; Laclau 2005). Indeed more generally, Jacques Rancière (1999) contends that the very definition of politics is that “supernumerary” moment in which a given “counting” – or ordering of society – is exposed as false or a miscount (35). That is to say, politics ‘happens’ when the Dusselian *pueblo* forces itself (the ‘supernumerary’ moment) into a pre-existing political order that previously denied it participation and representation.

These critical and theoretical interventions force us to ask what it is that distinguishes populism from democracy, or indeed, from politics *tout court*. What is the theoretical foundation of populism? From whence does it draw its distinction? In the previous chapter I illustrated how populism is best considered a symptom of a deeper anxiety held by observers who are – wittingly or not – personally invested in a global order steeped in coloniality. Aside from this symptomatic reading, however, might there be an attribute within the theoretical makeup of populism itself – to the extent that such a makeup exists – that makes it so unsettling for the proponents of modern, liberal, representative, and market-oriented democracy?

In this chapter I argue that populism is a spectacle internal to the machinations of modern liberal social formations. As such, populism does not endanger the social and political order upon which contemporary liberalism and capitalism are based. Quite the opposite, populism reinforces the representational logic of the modern nation-state. The previous chapter argued that populism is feared so much by political science and the forces of order because of its potentially destabilizing and transformative effects; the rest of this chapter illustrates in theoretical terms the degree to which these fears are unfounded. Indeed, from this dissertation's drive to conceptualize a multitudinous politics and democracy in Venezuela – or more humbly, a politics that is *more* multitudinous than procedural – populism could be seen as a dangerous step towards the disempowerment of the most creative and egalitarian elements of the Bolivarian Revolution.

II. Populism as Symptom of Democracy?

In the previous chapter I argued that a majority of social science writing on populism treats it as a deficient form of quasi-democratic politics, despite the fact that by definition it depends upon and produces mass support. I furthermore illustrated ways in which this concern around populism in Latin American contexts is symptomatic of global logic of domination and racialization, an anxiety about the involvement of the many against the privilege of the few, and the division of labor, wealth, and political legitimacy also known as the colonality of power. Against this overwhelming trend in the social sciences, recent critical interventions by Margaret Canovan, Benjamin Arditi, and Ernesto Laclau have restaged the status of ostensibly

populist phenomena in order to re-examine the nature of democratic politics in the contemporary conjuncture. Rather than starting from the premise that the spectacle and disruption of populism interrupts the smooth functioning of liberal democracy or a pathological regression from modern norms of governance and civilizational progress, these three theorists ask why populism has been such a ubiquitous political phenomenon since the late nineteenth century. In varying ways, each of the three locates populism at the very core of contemporary democracy. In this section I contend that while these moves are important correctives to the anti-democratic fear of the many on show by its critics, a mere inversion and validation of populism fails to escape the social world it critiques.

Margaret Canovan (1999) approaches populism as a political strategy that exists in the gap between the ‘redemptive’ and ‘pragmatic’ faces of modern democracy. By her account, democracy itself is the site of a tension between romantic notions of popular sovereignty, redemptive potentials of public life, and the utilitarian reliance on institutions and transparent ‘rules of the game’ (10). Democracy also is supposed to have built-in safeguards to deal with the intense conflict of interests endemic to human political life, even though *and at the same time* it tends to be predisposed to favor charismatic forms of authority that energize and mobilize populations. In this analysis democracy itself combines Max Weber’s (1958) classic distinction between *charismatic* and *bureaucratic* forms of authority. As such populism is democracy to the extent that it resists the closure of the gap between these two internal poles – the plebiscitary and the technocratic – of contemporary politics.

In the previous chapter, this interstitiality of populism was described in terms of ‘hybrid’ or ‘postliberal’ regime types that pose potential threats to the self-evident good of liberal governance (see especially Corrales and Penfold 2011). Analysts concerned with hybrid regimes tend to associate them with ‘semi-authoritarian’ forms of ‘managed democracy,’ a category of political practices associated with strongmen characters like Russia’s Vladimir Putin, Belarus’s Alexander Lukashenko, and of course, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela (Diamond 2002). Against this, Canovan suggests that a dose of populism reinvigorates public life by introducing new actors to the political process, by making established actors reassess and adapt their position, and by giving a cause to government outside of bureaucratic rationality.

For the purposes of the present chapter, then, Canovan’s characterization considers populism a rejuvenating force that is inevitable and even desirable given the institutional design and social relations of modern liberal democracies. Populist phenomena are usually unsettling, but like the occasional unexpected rush of adrenaline, they are ultimately good for the constitution. Populism thus does not threaten society. Quite the contrary, populism rescues modern liberal democracy from itself.

Benjamin Arditi (2003) follows Canovan’s analysis and reinforces the assertion that populism should not be considered a “standalone phenomenon” somehow antagonistic to modern democracy. Rather, populism is for Arditi better conceptualized as a “recurrent feature of modern politics” that in large part arises due

to the disconnect between notions of popular sovereignty and political representation

(20). Populism is thus

a symptom or paradoxical element that can both disturb and renew the operation of democratic politics, the populist mobilization functions as a mirror where [democracy itself] can look at the rougher edges that remain veiled by the gentrifying veneer of its liberal format. These two manifestations of populism can thrive in a democratic setting, but the third possibility works as an underside that can endanger that setting. It also emerges from within democratic politics, but as a ‘misfire’ whereby populism can morph into authoritarianism all too easily...taken together, the mode of representation, the idea of a politics at the edge and the possibility of the underside, will enable us to recast the populist experience as an internal periphery of liberal-democratic politics (20).

By “internal periphery” Arditì refers to the reemergence of something previously pushed out of consciousness. In psychoanalysis, this ‘return of the repressed’ can take the shape of nervous tics, recurring dreams, sexual fantasies, kinks, irrational aggression, and so forth. In the contemporary political moment where the closure of debate and postpolitical management has in large part taken the place of ideological and class struggle, the charismatic ‘jolts’ of populism reinvigorate the usually pacified body politic.⁹⁴ However, in either case, while these returning repressed elements trigger crises in the subject, it is only in the most extreme of cases that they actually threaten the existence or functioning of the ego or the social structure and mode of production, respectively.

Thus “populism might not break loose from a democratic setting, but it becomes something of an unstable phenomenon within that setting” (27). In this way Populism is according to Arditì an ‘underside’ to democracy, a drive that aims at the

⁹⁴ More on this ‘postpolitical condition’ in chapter five of this dissertation.

dissolution of the ‘gap’ between the represented and their representatives. It is, in other words, symptomatic of the ‘dangerous’ – from the perspective of constituted powers – drive to *democratize* democracy.

Laclau’s (2005) work on populism takes Arditì and Canovan’s reflections on liberal democracy and extends them to a meditation on metapolitics. For Laclau, populism not only represents an integral or symptomatic element of ‘democracy’ but is itself synonymous with the ‘the political’ (171). In the formation of populist coalitions, he contends, signifying chains are produced that stitch disparate social demands together, creating publics out of more or less unrelated subjects. Populism, in other words, forms imaginary communities by which one group of actors – for example, the poor – enter into coalitional relationships with actors defined by potentially distinct concerns – environmentalism and feminism, for example. Without the coming together of a people through the identification with a populist figurehead (like Hugo Chávez) and against an internal or external enemy (the local opposition, United States imperialism, or both) Laclau contends politics itself is impossible.

From this perspective, then, the Bolivarian Revolution is a populist formation – and this is considered to be a positive thing – insofar as it has entailed a mass mobilization of the population. Against the alienation and disempowerment of neoliberal technologies of surveillance, calculation, and control, populism forcefully demands a role for the public and for the many in governing collective life. It revitalizes liberal democracy by expanding its sphere of influence. It should be seen as the extension of modern democracy, not its retardation or negation.

A number of the *misiones bolivarianas* highlight the extent to which the Bolivarian Revolution cannot be simply categorized as a populist phenomenon that relegates political activity to the patron-client transactions of a present day *caudillismo*. Better, to the extent that the Bolivarian Revolution is ‘populist’ it also illustrates that populisms cannot be reduced to an anti-institutionalist personalism, a position argued by some authors considered in the previous chapter. Quite the contrary, institutions have proliferated in Bolivarian Venezuela, and many of its key programs reinforce subject positions specific to modern liberalism – such as the gendered citizen and racialized worker – rather than retreating to a primal community or some sort of anti-capitalist horde or mob. To take just one example, the remit of *Misión identidad* is to ensure that all Venezuelans have a national identity card, or *cédula*. In Venezuela, a *cédula* is needed for any interaction one has with the state apparatus; it is a marker of citizenship and the rights and opportunities associated therewith similar to a Social Security card in the United States. Even though the *cédula* has existed in Venezuela since the 1940s, it was not until *misión identidad* that the government made a systematic effort to register and track all Venezuelans. This move on the part of the Bolivarian Revolution is designed to help citizens make good on the government’s claims to resurrect the social welfare state, a claim that is all the more needed given that recent decades of social precarity has rendered many Venezuelans them statistically, socially, and politically invisible. The Bolivarian Revolution in this light has not just not threatened liberal nation-state institutions; it has saved many of them after twenty

years of the welfare state's retreat and popular experimentation with new, non-statist, forms of organizing the social.

There is of course a clear electoral incentive for the Chávez government to ensure that the citizens who have received access to education and health care under his social programs also have the ability to vote for him. However, the implications of a program like *misión identidad* go beyond that of the ballot box. *Misión identidad* and other missions – particularly those associated with education – can be seen as machines that produce modern citizens, fix their official individual identity, and insert them into the state apparatus. In this sense, rather than a sort of primeval massification of bodies that occurs under the umbrella of populism, the Bolivarian process in Venezuela forms bodies into subjects and subjects into populations. The *cédula* allows the state to track particular needs, collect demographic information, position bodies in relation to one another in ways that previous administrations never imagined. Better, the Bolivarian Revolution is extending the logic of the modern welfare state more evenly across the territory controlled by the central state, rather than limiting the enjoyment of these functions to rich urbanites.

Misión Identidad thus follows Laclau's conceptualization of populism as a function that incorporates 'the people' (the excluded) into a structural framework of institutional representation and democracy. However, in so doing, we are already squarely on the terrain of constituted power as articulated in the contemporary modern/colonial and capitalist world system. Against the logic of a multitudinous democracy that ruthlessly strikes out against mediation and alienation, this notion of

populism *categorizes* its energies and transfers it to the logic of the state. As I argue in the following section, such a move flattens not only difference in favor of the equivalential logic of the modern citizen that dwells within the modern market, it also limits the terrain of possible action to one of recourse to and dependency upon the state apparatus.

Where does such an understanding of ‘the political’ and populism lead? Can populism offer an alternative framework to contemporary – exclusionary, market-centered, raced, classed, and gendered – liberal democracy? If, as the theorists considered in the present section have suggested, populism should be considered as a recurring element internal to modern liberal democracies, what hope can it actually provide for the victims of these political, social, and above all economic systems?

III. Populism as ‘the political’ and Hegemony as the End of Class

Struggle: Ernesto Laclau

Slavoj Žižek (2007) argues that Laclau’s formulation of populism as metaphysics and a politics

provides a neutral transcendental matrix of an open struggle whose content and stakes are themselves defined by the contingent struggle for hegemony, while ‘class struggle’ presupposes a particular social group (the working class) as a privileged social agent. This privilege is not itself the outcome of hegemonic struggle but is grounded in the objective social position of this group—the ideological-political struggle is thus ultimately reduced to an epiphenomenon of ‘objective’ social processes, powers, and their conflicts. (79)

‘Populism’ tells us nothing of the stakes or content of a given political struggle. In my language, it translates the collectivity of singularities that is the multitude into an abstract ‘logic’ that transcends and regulates the particularity of struggle. For Laclau

this is precisely its virtue. Populism, he contends, does not represent a deviation from the ‘normal’ political workings of contemporary democracy, but rather follows the ‘logic of the political’ perfectly. Herein lies the problem for Žižek. Populism is, in his words, an “ideological mystification” which “insofar as in its very notion it displaces the immanent social antagonism into the antagonism between the unified ‘people’ and its external enemy, it harbors ‘in the last instance’ a long-term proto-Fascist tendency” (83). Populism neutralizes class struggle. Its real fiction is that ‘the nation’ or ‘the people’ are ultimately one and that the *real enemy* is the (racially, sexually or geographically) *other*. Put differently, populism attempts to convince subalterns that their interests correspond to those of the boss.⁹⁵

In this and elsewhere Žižek’s (2008) concerns dovetail somewhat with political scientists worried that populism is bad for the institutional structures of contemporary liberal democracies. He differs, however, in that rather than making this criticism in hopes of bolstering such institutions, Žižek contends populism does not go far enough in dismantling the current order. Paraphrasing an ex-Prime Minister of Ireland, he

⁹⁵ It is of course worth noting that, by and large, Žižek’s point of reference is European populism, whereas the template from which Laclau builds his work on populism is that of Peronismo in Argentina. However, rather than making the perhaps easier argument that Laclau and Žižek are simply talking about different phenomena, I contend that the more interesting tension occurs at the discursive level, where they indeed think they are engaging the same object. As my previous consideration of political-theoretical treatments of populism should suggest, the construction of an authentic and immanent *people* or *pueblo* facing an enemy is central to populist dynamics. Whether that enemy is conceived to be the danger of cheap Eastern European labor and Islamophobia (Žižek’s favorite example being the French and Dutch ‘no’ votes for the European Constitution in 2005) or the oligarchy, the discursive work of subject-formation is one of antagonism, authenticity and exclusivity in the battle of the *people* against their enemies.

concludes, “populism is good enough in practice, but not in theory” (264). That is to say, the *short-term* effect of populism is for Zizek is a refusal of ‘post-political’ and technocratic consensus. Any “authentic radical politics” must, for Zizek, begin here, in the denial that history has ended (279). Like Canovan, he sees in populism an element of democracy’s internal dialectic, in which the violent, egalitarian demands of the excluded are normalized, contained, and disciplined by the institutions of modern states. Ultimately, for Zizek, this dialectic is purely negative, a reactive Hegelian *bad infinity*. “The ultimate difference between true radical-emancipatory politics and populist politics,” he writes, “is that authentic radical politics is active, imposing, enforcing its vision, while populism is fundamentally *reactive*, a reaction to a disturbing intruder” (304). Populism, with its lack of ideological cohesion and positive vision (an attribute also described by the political scientists) can never produce any sort of radical break with the contemporary order. From the perspective of the excluded who are caught in its wave, alleges Zizek, populism can only ever hope to move about deck chairs on a doomed ship.⁹⁶

In this section I augment Zizek’s attack on Laclau’s thesis from another, perhaps unanticipated, theoretical perspective: that of Antonio Gramsci. In his development of the concept of the ‘national popular’ in his prison writings collected

⁹⁶ Zizek’s dismissal of populism and contemporary democratic politics in their fundamental senses stems from a line of contemporary critical thought that sees the current moment of human rights and democratic consensus as the neutralization the revolutionary project of creating new men (*sic!*) and new civilizations. In this sense, in the repeated injunction to ‘save humanity’ our era is profoundly conservative. Alain Badiou (2007) describes this in Lacanianese as the neutralization of the *passion for the real*, or, the audacity of 20th century social and anti-colonial revolutionaries to attempt the creation of new societies and new ways of being in the world.

under the title ‘The Modern Prince’ and elsewhere, I will argue that Gramsci acknowledged the importance of the leader-led dynamic adopted by populism but did so in a *concrete* manner attentive to the need for organic bonds oriented towards progressive change. While Gramsci was intensely dedicated to a substantively egalitarian democracy and the active participation of the many or ‘the masses’⁹⁷ in politics, he was nonetheless wary of the historical effects what we might call ‘populism’ has had in Europe. That is to say, he refused to simply advocate *any and all* politics that included the incorporation of mass behavior and culture. Rather, Gramsci theorized an intense dialectic in which masses and party would move beyond capitalist democracy. The question for the study of the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela and its contribution to political thought is in this light one of emphasizing the particularity of struggles without falling into a sort of postmodern relativism that has lost its will to choose sides or fight. The Bolivarian Revolution, I will argue here as well as in the following chapter, attempts to carry out precisely this sort of reinvention and reinitiation of what might be loosely described as the contemporary form of the

⁹⁷ While the term has fallen out of fashion, ‘the masses’ nonetheless adequately describes the categories Gramsci deployed, faced as he was with the rapid urban and industrialization of Italy and the Fascist reaction to worker power. I will thus cease the use of scare quotes in what remains. The plural form of masses is important as well, given that Gramsci did not conceive of the working class as a homogenous mass, but rather – and this was intensified through the working of bourgeois state power – as a necessarily disunified conglomeration of disempowered peoples. This would have been all the more prescient to him given the difficulties of organizing in the historically racist Northern Italy suddenly awash with cheap and abundant southern laborers. Hence the need for any socialist strategy to include the work of constructing the national popular, or at the very least to include in its agenda for social transformation the work of enculturation and formation of a spirit of shared identity among subalterns.

class struggle.⁹⁸ By privileging the abstract, universal logic over the particularity of struggle populism seeks to demobilize or subordinate the multitude's antagonisms within a larger scripted totality. Despite its initial recognition of social fragmentation, it ultimately entails a homogenizing function that narratives and proscribes revolutionary change.

Laclau's theorization and eventual reclamation of populism in *On Populist Reason* (2005) is based on three conceptual categories which will be familiar to those who have worked through his larger corpus. The first, the discursive nature of historical and political reality, rests on Laclau's understanding that political "elements do not pre-exist the relational complex but are constituted through it. Thus 'relation' and 'objectivity' are synonymous" (68). The people do not produce the leader, nor the leader the people. For Laclau there is no original or ontological moment, no *a priori* privileging of one element over another, just a perpetual play of differential demands articulated by social blocs which are themselves constituted in the utterance of such demands (13).⁹⁹ Discourses are the relational and reflexive structure through which these demands emerge.

⁹⁸ Loosely because the notion of 'class' that emerges from the Bolivarian Revolution does not fit neatly into that of twentieth century deployments, both because of its attention to locations of struggle and oppression beyond the workplace as well as the fact that historically Venezuela has a rather small industrial working class.

⁹⁹ The 'social demand' is the smallest unit of politics for Laclau. He uses the term in the double sense in English, both as a request delivered to a figure or position of authority as well as in the sense of a claim. Laclau considers this ambiguity to be productive in that the starting point for many transformative sequences is a *request* – for inclusion, representation, and access to a resource – that is impossible in a given context. The unfulfilled demand-as-request can then become demand-as-assertion, as in, 'if the political situation in which we find ourselves is hard-wired to be incapable of

The second of Laclau's categories, *empty signifiers and hegemony*, rests on the differential ensembles that emerge from the interactive and mutually constitutive play of discourses. While for Laclau there is no ontological substance to political bodies, the signification of such coherence nonetheless remains instrumental in and absolutely vital to the actual practice of politics. In his words "the category of totality cannot be eradicated, but that, as a failed totality, it is a horizon and not a ground" (71). Since for Laclau the political is a dynamic terrain without center and without pre-existing actors or circumstances, a vulgar notion of totality as a fixed identity or position from which actors or groups emerge is precluded. However, the positing of such a coherence is nonetheless instrumental in the execution of any political demand in that the differential identities in play must either band together or set themselves apart in the pursuit of their particular goals. In other words, Laclau conceives hegemony as a sort of contingent coherence. These shared goals or identities form with the aid of empty signifiers, constantly and affectively refreshed and recoded, by which differential ensembles are born.

Finally, discourse, empty signifiers, and hegemony must all be understood in terms of rhetoric and specifically in the category of *catachresis*. That is to say, these affective and differential ensembles come to be through the rhetorical suturing of demands and publics in which a figurative term takes the place of a literal one.

Laclau's example is uncharacteristically clear. Within the populist phenomenon, the leader never addresses his or her constituency as 'the assembled and differential

meeting our requests, then this request becomes the basis of a future order in which it is possible' (73).

demanding bodies of mutually co-constitutive failed totalities.’ Rather, he or she hails ‘the people.’ This is for Laclau the logic of the political and of populism: the contingent articulation of an impossible totality which unifies and homogenizes various sets of demands either by saying as little possible or by saying it in such a manner so as to maximize the potential for affective investment by as many actors or bodies as possible (71).

For Laclau “the people” that is produced contingently in the populist relation is not an “ideological expression, but a real relation between social agents. It is, in other terms, one way of constituting the unity of the group” (73). This unity-people comes about as the result of two preconditions. The first has to do with an actual or perceived “internal antagonistic frontier” between the people and power. The second is that the people – at this point still in a state of disunity – makes various demands of power that in turn defines their substance and allows for the differentiation of various publics. Something like the unified ‘people’ of populism comes about, then, when the ‘democratic’ or differential demands of publics can be unified and ‘made popular’ through the social and political function of the empty signifier. The resulting relation is one of a tense equivalence among differential demands (80). Democratic demands that cannot be incorporated into this equivalential signifying chain “remain heterogeneous to it” in a relation Laclau contends corresponds to the Lacanian ‘real’ (95).¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Though no doubt similar, this formulation strikes me as closer to Rancière’s ‘supernumerary’ demand than to Lacan’s division between the Symbolic and the Real.

The people is thus for Laclau a real and tense relation *internal* to a given political order. That is to say, a symbolic representation of the body politic (for want of better term) pre-exists the people, and hence of its ‘collective will’ (163). Formed through representation, it would by Laclau’s account continually be in process, incorporating new heterogeneous demands into the sphere of symbolic and equivalential representation and excluding others. In a nice case of autoreferentiality, the people-populism ‘political logic’ outlined by Laclau presupposes his own conceptualization of ‘the political’ (elaborated with Chantal Mouffe) and operates within ‘it.’¹⁰¹ Indeed, Laclau argues “populist reason...amounts...to political reason *tout court*” and thus

breaks with two forms of rationality which herald the end of politics: a total revolutionary event that, bringing about the full reconciliation of society with itself, would make the political moment superfluous, or a mere gradualist practice that reduces politics to administration (225).

Populism is thus a way of *rescuing* politics from the twin evils of revolutionary messianism and formal, technical and bureaucratic democratic formalism. By operating through empty signifiers, it reopens dimensions of *possibility* to political life closed by the contemporary ordering of society. Populism thus neutralizes the *desire* for revolutionary transformation (Badiou’s *passion for the real*) that circulates in society but especially among and from the position of the excluded and oppressed, identifying and “the partiality of the *plebs*” into “the universality of the *populus*” (225).

¹⁰¹ Though, it is worth noting that while Laclau and Mouffe started from a position one might roughly describe as ‘radical democracy’ in the 1980s, Mouffe has since changed her position to one in favor of ‘agonistic democracy’ and Laclau to populism. Both, however, remain firmly in the camp of ‘postmarxists’ that seek to leave the cause of class war definitively in the dustbin of history.

There are many ways in which what Laclau is expressing here reflects in abstract terms the political practice of populism we encountered in last chapter's treatment of the social science literature on the topic. Populism is a site of transition from disparate and unassociated social groups to a unified public through the dual processes of bracketed antagonism in relation to an enemy-other and the affected identification with a symbolic leader.¹⁰² Populism thus allows for multiple claims of

¹⁰² By 'bracketed antagonism' I mean to suggest a sort of agonism specific to modern democracy. As Laclau's long-time collaborator Chantal Mouffe (2005) contends, "modern democracy's specificity lies in the recognition and legitimation of conflict and the refusal to suppress it by imposing an authoritarian order...a well functioning democracy calls for a clash of *legitimate democratic* political positions." However, she continues, there is always a danger that "democratic confrontation will be replaced by a confrontation between essentialist forms of identification or non-negotiable moral values...antagonisms can take many forms and it is illusory to believe that they could ever be eradicated. This is why it is important to allow them an agonistic form of expression through the pluralist democratic system" (30). In other words populism, like agonistic democracy, pacifies contention by incorporating competing moral and ethical claims into its own apparatus. There are two problems with this, at one and the same time theoretical and practical. The first concerns the question of who decides. That is, within this schematization, it is not the insurrectionary or excluded that establish the criteria by which they are deemed assimilable to a given order. The directionality concerning access to pluralist inclusion is purely top-down: constituted determines constituent power. While it is of course true that the power of the many often forces a decision upon the powers that be, Laclau and Mouffe's approach fails to capture the potential of the many even as they seek to organize a politics where their voice can be heard by privileging the position of established power, asking it essentially to be tolerant and benign, more inclusive and fair. The second concern comes with the discursive limits of populism and agonistic democracy. The ontological demand of the poor vis-à-vis liberal capitalist democracies is to change the world such that neither exists any longer. That is to say, democratic pluralism asks that we all get along, respecting each other's rights. A perspective rooted in the experience of the poor demands that everyone have a right not only to exist in their current state, but also to have the food, shelter, education, access and resources necessary *to no longer be poor*. That Mouffe chooses to caution against the 'essentialist,' 'non-negotiable moralism' of such a position exposes the limits both of her ethical vision as well as those of her project's potential to contribute to the fight for social justice.

politically distinct subjects to be unified through the translation of the desires they invest into their lifeworlds – whether to change or protect them matters little – into ‘demands’ that can be understood and acted upon by the whole, as represented by the leader. The result is therefore something of a pluralism in which difference is tolerated and translated into understandable units. This abstract schema of ‘the political’ goes far in describing the ideal-scenario of a functioning mass-based-but-still-liberal democracy. However, it falls short of characterizing either the empirical record or ethical horizon of the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela.

Prior to the 1998 election of Hugo Chávez a coalition of political parties including his own electoral vehicle, the now disbanded *Movimiento de la Quinta República* (Fifth Republic Movement, MVR)¹⁰³ was stitched together under the ‘Patriotic Pole’ coalition. Since that time, many middle class parties that endorsed Chávez’s first bid for the presidency have moved steadily into the opposition camp, an exodus that picked up pace significantly with Chávez’s call in 2007 to form a single “United Socialist Party of Venezuela” to lead both the electoral and social fronts of the Bolivarian Revolution.¹⁰⁴ More significantly, by the time of the 2006 presidential

¹⁰³ Venezuelan law prohibits political parties from using Simón Bolívar’s name in their own. However, Chávez took advantage of the fact that in Spanish, ‘B’ and ‘V’ are both pronounced like the former. The Fifth Republic Movement was thus not only a signal to the refounding of the country – Chávez campaigned on the promise to convoke a constituent assembly to rewrite the nation’s constitution – it also aligned the party with the ‘Bolivarian Revolution’ for which Chávez was calling.

¹⁰⁴ In one of his earliest speeches calling for the formation of the PSUV, Chávez (2007) played historian. He constantly pointed to the disunity among the constituent parties of Salvador Allende’s *Unidad Popular* in Chile as the chief domestic cause for the success of the Pinochet coup. He also drew causal lines between the endemic maldevelopment of the region and the failure of Bolívar’s *Gran Colombia* project in the

recall referendum, not only was the *Chavista* bloc made up almost entirely of the poor, but the government had shifted from its earlier self-conceptualization as a nationalist force to the vanguard of a new, *Bolivarian*, Socialism. In other words the Bolivarian Revolution has over the years increasingly moved away from the inclusive cross-class and multi-issue politics of populist empty signifiers and increasingly toward a class-based and now at least nominally socialist politics.

But more important than voter turnout and electoral contests is the degree to which *Bolivarianismo* and *Chavismo* – which must be kept conceptually distinct from one another even if they are often colloquially synonymous¹⁰⁵ – is the degree to which these categories inform the production of subjectivity in Venezuela today. The populist formula contends that these signs overflow with meaning, settling into stable identities only momentarily depending on the individual, an attribute Zizek contends falls short of the revolutionary positions necessary for enacting social transformation. However, both this analysis and its Zizekian critique fail to recognize the extent to which the central tenets of *Bolivarianismo* have come to structure the terrain of political possibility in contemporary Venezuela.

1820s and 1830s. Finally, he was very careful in calling for a United *Socialist* Party that would be defined by “democracy of the people, participatory democracy, protagonistic democracy” rather than the Leninist ‘dictatorship of the Proletariat (30). This insistence on democracy, against the perceived authoritarianism of both Cuban and Soviet Communism, as well as an insistence on the fundamentally Christian character of socialism, have been mainstays of *Chavista* discourse about Bolivarian ‘socialism for the twenty first century.’

¹⁰⁵ As I will argue in the following chapter, *Bolivarianismo* is best conceived of as a historical and mythical discourse that has been associated with Venezuela since long before the rise of Hugo Chávez.

Two examples from the Venezuelan opposition illustrate the extent to which political discourse has been transformed by the moral and political economy of the Bolivarian Revolution. The first example concerns a hopeful in the run-up to the 2012 presidential race, María Corina Machado. In 2005 and 2006, Machado directed *Súmate*, the United States-funded NGO that organized the campaign to recall President Chávez. During the campaign she was received by then-US President George W. Bush in the Oval Office for an ill-conceived photo opportunity. That she did so at a point when no Venezuelan official of any rank had met with senior representatives of the US government, and the fact that even many anti-Chavistas considered Bush to be no friend of Venezuela did little to help the campaign or to counter the Bolivarian claim that the opposition is made up of foreign agents.



Figure 3.1 “Here comes the People’s Capitalism, Here comes María. Opportunity for the people. (Source: <http://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/6709>). Note: in the original, the color of the bold slogan across the top – Viene el Capitalismo Popular, Viene María – is a red that closely approximates the red of official PSUV propaganda.

Throughout 2011 Machado, by then a deputy in the National Assembly representing some of the richest neighborhoods in the country, tried to position herself as a unity candidate against Chávez’s long-anticipated bid for a third term. Her campaign was in many ways shockingly honest – centering on the defense of capitalism and private

property – but found itself having to translate these principles for mass consumption by the poor. Hence, one of her campaign posters (figure 3.1) promises opportunity and capitalism for the people in bold, Bolivarian-Red letters.

The point of interest here is not that Machado is attempting to sell the virtues of the free market but that she must do so in a language defined by *chavismo*. It is not currently possible (as of mid-2012) to pursue office in Venezuela without an appeal to the national-popular, and preferably in the bold, red script of the revolution. In the past politicians ran on platforms of national development and, as was more often the case, their personalities. Between 1998 and 2006, opposition candidates tended to establish their credentials in purely reactive terms, painting themselves as anti-Chávezes and consistently winning the same number of votes from the same demographic. Today, on the other hand, discourse must speak not just to the abstract ‘pueblo’ but also to the concrete needs and benefits of a candidate and his or her ideology for the poor.

This has also been seen in the strategies followed both in the opposition stronghold state government of Zulia and the opposition party Primero Justicia (Justice First). In Zulia, Venezuela’s westernmost state and center of oil production, the state government has instituted a series of social programs in much the same style as the nationwide *misiones bolivarianas*. The Zulian iterations name themselves after local heroes, feeding a strong regionalist affect that also nourishes a separatist

movement among the state's wealthy citizens.¹⁰⁶ Primero Justicia, for their part, have founded a few 'Casas de Justicia para Todos' (Houses of Justice for All) that aim to identify their political brand with needed social welfare services in Venezuela's poorest barrios. The rationale in both cases is to associate their cause with the country's poor, but also to replicate the government's success in winning hearts and minds as a step towards winning votes and institutional power. They are, in other words, not just trying to appropriate government discourse for their own, they are also attempting to replicate the government's activities, to "out Chávez" the *chavistas*.

These could not be viable strategies – to the extent that they are – if *Bolivarianismo* was merely a chain of floating and empty signifiers. While it is indeed true that the Bolivarian Revolution is many things to many people, and while one could be forgiven for being cynical about these moves by the opposition, they nonetheless illustrate the extent to which Venezuelan politics today are rooted in the specific content and orientation of class-based policies. We would thus be better served to approach the Bolivarian Revolution as *habitus* in formation – or the structuring structure that creates both the discursive framework of a given lifeworld as well as the criteria by which that framework can be challenged, amended, and negated (Bourdieu 1977) – than as an abstracted 'political' without content.

And in this way we can also glimpse the shortcomings of Laclau's populism in terms of a radical political project. The abstract and universal formalism, the way in

¹⁰⁶ Aside from being the richest state in the nation, Zulia has one of the country's highest rates of income inequality. Wealth tends to be centered among whites and Mestizos in Maracaibo, the capital city, while poverty is disproportionately found among the indigenous populations in the suburbs and rural areas.

which ‘radical democracy’ and ‘agonism’ domesticate the antagonism and conflict of a society in *actual*, living, transition, and the reintroduction of individual choice and preference against structural power relations with a global reach all draw Laclau closer to contemporary liberal representative democracies than to revolutionary sequences such as some of those taking place in Venezuela today. At best, populism as theorized by Laclau makes a virtue of necessity, recognizing the vacuous nature of much politics in the developed world, offering marketing advice for would-be candidates on how to best be all things to all people.¹⁰⁷ In a worst-case scenario, this logic can be conceived as total, rendering alternative approaches to politics, collective life, and social change as either whimsical or catastrophic. Laclau’s position that all politics are hegemonic and therefore populist thus conceals possibilities like those referenced by Roland Denis at the outset of this chapter, moments of revolutionary transformation in which the empire of signs is shattered by the forward motion of the multitude.

Laclau’s theorization of populism and hegemony in other words reflects the formula by which constituted power seeks to constrain constituent power, albeit refracted through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Saussurian linguistics. Paraphrasing Jon Beasley-Murray (2011) populism in this light should not be seen as a dysfunctional or misfired form of liberal democracy (as Arditì and Canovan might suggest), but rather as an adaptation of the logic of the social contract to changing times in a moment when the ethical and political claims on which it rests have been

¹⁰⁷ The successful 2008 Presidential bid of Barack Obama in the United States, with all of its bloated but ultimately contentless sloganeering, comes to mind here.

obviated by history (63). Even a heavily revised populism fails to escape the representational limits of contemporary democracy. Furthermore, by basing all politics on ‘the demand’ Laclau perhaps inadvertently reinforces key aspects of modern liberalism that naturalize the self-interested *homo economicus* and confuses the messy collective work of politics with the ‘marketplace of ideas’ (Laclau 2005, 72).

It is in this way that one can locate the key difference between Laclau and Gramsci vis-à-vis the politics of populism. Laclau’s conceptualization, ostensibly based on Gramsci, is one of representations and surfaces, equating politics with the management and incorporation of differential ‘demands’ that have been translated into the universal and legible idiom of constituted power rather than the struggle between modes of being. Laclau seeks neither to disrupt nor to reform the current order. He posits it. Rather than go about the dirty and difficult work of identifying and working with new subjectivities and socialities, he reduces alterity to ‘demands’ already translated into a preconfigured logic. The assumption, in other words, is that any demand can be incorporated into a given order. For Laclau, representation is both the ends and logic of politics. The work of leaders, movements and publics is thus one of suturing differing demands to one another through the play of signifying chains and empty signifiers. This then is the abstract formula into which political phenomena are forced by analytical sleight of hand to adapt. Translated: form precedes content. Taking a page from the modernity/coloniality group, this means that other ways of constructing politics must be translated into the language of

prevailing structures, resulting in assimilation in the place of autonomy and revolutionary transformation.

Gramsci, on the other hand, while attentive to the fact that exigencies can require a politics of compromise and coalition, nonetheless retained a fidelity to the importance of working class one-sidedness. Without such a perspective, which Gramsci (1999) describes variously in terms of the functions of ‘organic intellectuals,’ of the ‘national popular,’ ‘Jacobinism,’ and of “throw[ing] into the struggle all the political and moral resources” at one’s disposal (109), one will always end like the Italian bourgeoisie – an inept cartoon of itself. The notion that form could or can in any way precede content is, for Gramsci, the abiding lie of liberal bourgeois representative democracy.

Laclau attempts to sidestep capture by a barely reconstructed liberal and formalistic notion of democracy by emphasizing the unsettled nature of his systemization and the concept of hegemony. The totalities of ‘the people’ and of ‘the political’ within populism and politics in general are, he insists, eternal horizons and perpetual failures. Laclau (2005) argues:

political analyses which attempt to polarize politics in terms of the alternative between total revolution and gradualist reformism miss the point: what escapes them is the alternative logic of the *objet petit a* – that is to say, the possibility that a partiality can become the name of an impossible totality (in other words, the logic of hegemony) (226).¹⁰⁸

Laclau thus uses Lacan to avoid Lenin, and accuses a politics based on the correspondence of interests between leader and led of degenerating into a politics of

¹⁰⁸ The *objet petit a* is the Lacanian notion of an unattainable object of desire which is absolutely fundamental in subject formation.

‘mere identity.’ Against this, he poses populism, which he alleges corresponds to ‘the logic of hegemony’ – but to what end? Perhaps more importantly, does this deployment of ‘the logic of hegemony’ do such a logic justice? I would argue, with Gramsci, that Laclau’s failure to adequately consider one’s subjectivity in the context of struggle – *as an absolute orientation grounding politics and political action* – in his accounting of ‘the political’ or ‘hegemony’ only serves to mystify politics – which can only ever serve the interests of the dominant or hegemonic social bloc of any global historical moment.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Two clarifying caveats are in order here. First, I use the inelegant formulation “one’s subjectivity in the context of struggle” here to signal that we are not only discussing class struggle as well as to distance the notion of subjectivity from that of individual consciousness and choice. Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) classic attempt in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* to develop a form of radical, post-Marxist, politics in light of the pending failure of the Soviet project and the increasing power and prominence of the so-called ‘New Social Movements’ was an important corrective to the economism of too many statist ‘socialist’ political programs. To build a politics today (or ever) around a reductive notion of ‘social class,’ even ‘in the final instance’ of the more nuanced Marxisms of the twentieth century, is more likely to reproduce the exploitative and exclusionary consequences of liberal modernity than to contribute to a world organized on principles of solidarity and social justice. “One’s subjectivity in the context of struggle,” then, highlights the structural and antagonistic power relations at play in defining both the conjuncture and one’s imbrication therein.

The second caveat has to do with the selectively Lacanian nature of Laclau’s use of Lacan. In the first instance, attention to the *objet petit a* warns that a returning-remainder will inevitably result from a given structuring, this by no means automatically leads to the conclusion that structures ought to be organized with this incompleteness in mind. The real will always persist, whether we like it or not. There will always be exceptions, imperfections, and new challenges. This should not suggest, however, that one could ethically cease the chase it. And this is of course the danger of contemporary liberal democracies, the belief that the system is infinitely reformable, and that ‘we moderns’ have at the very least enlightened enough to unquestioningly defend contemporary cosmopolitanisms against all manner of barbaric – religious, political, sexual – threats. The real may indeed persist, but there is of course another Lacanian dictum to ‘traverse the fantasy,’ or to fully identify

Gramsci's notion of hegemony was always informed by a deeply historical account of the actually existing relations of force in a given moment. Thus, when Gramsci contends that the coming to power of any given historical bloc requires both autonomy from and alliance with other social groups, this must be understood as a *subaltern* phenomenon. That is, the subaltern classes are for various reasons divided and pitted against each other. The ultimate supersession of, in our case, global capitalism and its particular manifestations, requires the unification of the disunified subaltern classes, an operation that can only be carried out with the utmost of attention to the balance of forces, history, and identity of a given conjuncture. The key, however, is that while the form of a given moment's movement will be determined by that moment, the endgame is the expropriation of the expropriators and the construction of a new society to take the place of the old. There is in other words an irreducible content or aspect to Gramsci's hegemony that has been scoured away in the representational schema of Laclau's 'radical democracy.'¹¹⁰

What might be considered Gramsci's clearest consideration of 'populism' can be found in his writings collected under the title 'The Modern Prince' on 'Boulangism.' A general who played a central role in the crushing of the Paris Commune, Boulanger became a central figure of the deepening conservative reaction of French politics in the 1880s. At this time, a mass movement approximating the various and sundry definitions of Latin American populism crystallized around him,

oneself with the fantastic projection, in this case the attainment of a society without the closed mediations and exclusions of modern liberal democracy.

¹¹⁰ In this way we might also make the provisional conceptual distinction between Gramscian hegemony as a political logic and the 'hegemony theory' of Laclau.

demanding the convocation of a constituent assembly, the ‘military rejuvenation of society’ (i.e., taking revenge on the newly united Germany for the sound French defeat of the Franco-Prussian war), and the deep reform of parliament (Gramsci, 1972 166). The movement centered on a charismatic leader and promised the sort of change that would correct the problems of the present without necessarily challenging the economic structure of society.

Here we encounter both Gramsci’s innovation as well as the irreconcilability of his approach and that of Laclau. Against economism’s insistence that identity and revolutionary transformation be determined solely by the mode of production, Gramsci demands a more nuanced approach. He writes

when a movement of the Boulangist type occurs, the analysis realistically should be developed along the following lines: 1. Social content of the mass following of the movement; 2. What function did this mass have in the balance of forces – which is in process of transformation, as the new movement demonstrates by its very coming into existence? 3. What is the political and social significance of those of the demands presented by the movement’s leaders which find general assent? To what effective needs do they correspond? 4. Examination of the conformity of the means to the proposed end; 5. Only in the last analysis, and formulated in political not moralistic terms, is the *hypothesis* considered that such a movement will necessarily be perverted, and serve quite different ends from those which the mass of its followers expect (166).

In other words, proper analysis and development of strategy requires attention to the content of the movement in question. Who makes up the membership? To what demands do they respond most passionately? How is the movement structured and what are its means of action? Gramsci is in other words interested above all else in locating the subject-positions in which the class struggle is invested in order to develop strategy and to advance the struggle. This is a question of method, one that developed

concurrently throughout Latin America as revolutionaries adapted or rewrote Marxist theory in the face of local conditions. Gramsci demands an ascending analysis that discovers and maps power along its way. Hegemony theory of Laclau provides a map and a logic the analyst then fills in with details.

Gramsci's appraisal of *Boulangisme* does hold some similarity to Laclau's account of populism, however. Both authors reject pathologizing mass politics as one finds in, for example, Gustave Le Bon's *The Crowd*. What is more, Gramsci's initial move is similar to that of Laclau in that it recognizes that accounts which reject 'populism' out of hand have more to do with the fear of the masses in politics more than any positive political analysis of the balance of forces. In psycho-affective terms, he notes that popular perceptions *are* material forces in political matters (165). However, whereas Laclau moves from this initial and unquestionable insight to the construction of an abstract meta-structure of 'the political,' Gramsci insists analysis follow the 'progressive' function of the class struggle from the perspective of struggle itself rather than at the level of an abstract model or grammar.

Gramsci does not assume that any involvement of the masses in politics is inherently good any more than he considers it a danger or deviation. Indeed, the entirety of his analysis in this section of his prison writings is concerned with the effective construction of the Italian Communist party (which is, of course, the 'Modern Prince' about which he is writing). Gramsci's analysis *assumes* the necessity of mass involvement, but without the corresponding assumption that such involvement

will come about ‘spontaneously’ – or without the active participation of what he describes as ‘conscious leadership’ (196).

This appraisal of the actually existing class situation Gramsci faced allows us to distance him from Laclau’s notion of populism more clearly. For Gramsci, the real work of politics was that of developing and intensifying the class struggle through *party politics*. More precisely, politics occurred between the organic representatives of – to borrow Marx’s formulation – classes both *in themselves* and *for themselves*. Parties, he contends, must contain a *Jacobin* element tied to the collective will of the historical social bloc they represent, but must also act upon the masses making up the bloc to orient their will “towards the realization of a superior, total form of modern civilization” (133). The relation between the leadership and membership of any given *authentic* and *organic* movement was, in other words, a reciprocal one in which the mass base propelled the movement forward and the leadership worked continually to improve – to borrow a central phrase from Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution – the morals and enlightenment of the base.

The contemporary Venezuelan scene offers a rejoinder to both theorizations of politics, Gramsci’s hegemony as well as Laclau’s ‘Hegemony Theory.’ In the first case, the formation of the PSUV since 2007 has given little cause for celebration in terms of successfully integrating both ‘Jacobin’ and strategic elements. Indeed, Roland Denis has gone so far as to characterize the PSUV as “the starkest expression of the general impoverishment of popular capacities that began in 2005,” as “an apparatus with neither logic nor political efficiency,” and most damningly, “simply an electoral

machine, in which there are internal battles for access to power within the bureaucratic-corporatist state” (see Denis’ comments in Spronk et al. 2011, 253).¹¹¹

Denis’s comments point to another potential limitation of the Bolivarian Process from either perspective. To date the government of Hugo Chávez consistently hews to the legal, electoral path in its pursuit of ‘socialism for the twenty first century.’ However, its greatest base of support, self-identity, and reason for existence has come in moments where the legal order and elections were insufficient to secure the process’s future existence. The Bolivarian Revolution recognizes the *Caracazo* of 1989 as its birthday. Ungovernability in the form of mass, urban, insurrection also brought Chávez back to power after the 2002 coup and restarted the flow of oil in 2003. Yet the PSUV as currently organized has privileged mobilization for elections over self-determination and has been an apparatus for the imposition of ‘revolutionary discipline’ against elements in the larger Bolivarian movement who speak out against corruption, bureaucratism, and corporatism. The PSUV has without question been the most democratic and participatory of political parties in Venezuelan history; it conducts primaries and debates where historically the party heads chose candidates or, more recently in the case of the anti-Chavista opposition, through the ‘consensus’ of closed-door meetings of political elites. However, these democratic credentials speak much more to an attention to procedure than they do to a substantive, socially

¹¹¹ It must be noted, however, that other participants in the roundtable such as George Ciccariello-Maher and Michael Lebowitz, are much more optimistic about both the party as well as its imbrication with what they see as more authentic expressions of grassroots constituent power such as the communal councils and Bolivarian Missions.

leveling, and multitudinous form of collective political life. In other words and against the grain of much social science writing on the subject, the PSUV illustrates the degree to which the Bolivarian Revolution is not only democratic in the plebiscitary sense, but also and perhaps primarily in the formalistic one as well.

However, a fundamental class content and transformative trajectory nonetheless remain in the Bolivarian Revolution that keeps it from being reducible to a populism of the Laclauian or social science varieties. The limits of the discursive malleability of the Bolivarian signifiers can be seen in the laughable attempts on the part of the opposition to paint themselves as more legitimately ‘progressive’ or ‘humanist’ than the Chávez government. Thus, slogans like Machado’s ‘capitalism for the People’ fall on deaf ears. And this is the case *not* because there somehow exist limits to the transferability of signs and the contingency of meaning – one need only glimpse the way in which capitalism, freedom, fairness, and ‘the middle class’ have been linked in US political discourse to obviate such a notion. Rather, the notion of a ‘capitalism for the people’ fails in Venezuela because capitalism as a signifier has been linked with the living historical memory of neoliberalism, inequality, and austerity.¹¹² In other words, neither socialism nor capitalism can be considered empty signifiers in the present contexts of the Bolivarian Revolution and these signifiers carry as much social and politically organizing power in the present as does the figure of Chávez. Regardless of whatever shortcomings it may have in the revolutionary or

¹¹² For more on capitalism and neoliberalism in Venezuela and their roles in contemporary ‘postneoliberal’ political discourse, see Chapter Five of this dissertation.

transformative sense, it still would be off the mark to describe the process taking place today in terms of a populist phenomenon.

We have arrived then, at a historical and theoretical impasse. In the previous chapter I argued that populism betrays a symptomatic fear of the many, or of mass involvement in politics, on the part of contemporary political and social science about the non-West. In this chapter I have argued that theories of populism that equate it with democracy or posit it as a formula for radical social transformation over-emphasize its transformative potential. This has particularly been the case as I have argued in Bolivarian Venezuela, where contemporary power relations can be characterized neither in accord with liberal-democratic models nor with more potentially 'multitudinous' or autonomous expressions of constituent power.

IV. By Way of Conclusion: The Multitude Persists

Taken as a whole, this chapter and the preceding one offer a complicated view on a term often used to describe the Bolivarian Revolution and other progressive movements in Latin America. I have argued *both* that populism should not be seen as a threat to modern liberal democracies (in the previous chapter) *and* that this is precisely its greatest shortcoming. In each of these chapters, though they treated significantly differing disciplinary approaches to the matter, the critique of populism (or the critique of the critique of populism) has been animated by an ethical demand that the power of the multitude not be alienated or denied.

On this question of the multitude, this chapter has also pointed to the difficulty in recognizing both the promise and limitations of democracy in the present. The

creative and destructive constituent power that has punctuated recent Venezuelan history has opened space for newer, more inclusive and egalitarian politics. However, its institutional rationalization has all too often subordinated the immanent demands of autonomous social bodies to the electoral calendar of one of the hemisphere's most active democracies. As a result, miniature exoduses have taken place, as would-be *Chavistas* have consistently refused to accept that the only place their battle can occur is in the ballot box, and that the only weapon available is the candidate of *oficialismo*. As we saw in the case of the PSUV, this familiar demobilizing effect runs the risk of fragmenting or stagnating the Bolivarian process. Indeed, the movement's most significant setbacks to date – the 2007 constitutional referendum, the 2008 regional elections, and the 2010 National Assembly elections – all came about *after* the supposed consolidation of *Chavista* hegemony. The possible forms democracy can take in Venezuela are increasingly settling on the choice between the managed, absentee, representative liberalism of the market and the multitudinous one Roland Denis (2005) invoked of “vandals, of the poor, of proletarians without work, of organized collectives and movements,” leading a “‘Chávez without Chavismo,’ which is to say, a leadership that must obey the multitudinous command that supports him” (140). We are back on the terrain of a rule by the possibility or impossibility of a rule by obeying, or, of that multitudinous democracy in which constituted power *both necessarily and actively seeks to* ‘catch up’ to constituent power.

The matter of a more multitudinous politics thus runs deeper than a mere theoretical exercise in the limits of liberalism or the radical's goal of a pure,

immanent, participatory democracy. An undeniable *practical* concern is also at play in the matter. As the Bolivarian Revolution attempts to shore up and institutionalize its advances it disillusioned the very multitudes that opened up the political space to make it possible in the first place. This is also why I have argued in this chapter that populism should be recognized as a mode of integrating socially excessive elements into the imagined community of the nation. This integration, furthermore, can be more or less horizontal and equal. The moments in which the Bolivarian Revolution has shined – where it has been most inspirational at home and abroad and has made the most significant impacts on the political culture and social realities in Venezuela – have been those created by the multitude rather than by its erstwhile representatives. The trick, however, lies in forming a politics that does more than simply wait for the multitude, like some sort of democratic messiah. This then is what is at stake in differentiating between populism and social revolution. The former seeks to maintain more or less intact the present organization of society, rendering the social sciences’ anxieties I diagnosed in the previous chapter unwarranted, while the latter relentlessly politicizes and challenges the inequalities of the present.

The explosions of constituent power punctuating recent Venezuelan history point toward this latter characterization. Rather than a rationally ordered and holistic nation, or at least the reasonable give and take of interests and demands envisioned by democratic agonism, the power of the many demands an end to any world order that apologizes for the crimes of poverty and exclusion. This fight can take many forms – as we saw in Gramsci’s characterization of hegemony, class struggle must adapt to the

particularities at hand, whereas for Laclau hegemony replaces this forceful antagonism with representation and compromise – but it remains an absolute frontier.

This absolute frontier, finally, is what anchors the Bolivarian Revolution within a discourse that resists translation into the language of contemporary democracy as defined by what we might call a ‘new’ Washington Consensus on political legitimacy rather than economic governance. In the face of this, a number of social scientists have developed ‘hybrid regime theory,’ while a number of theorists of democracy fear the potential for a homogenizing vitalism in the Bolivarian Revolution’s articulation of the pueblo. As we have seen in attempts by the opposition to commandeer and redefine signifiers that form the core of *Bolivarianismo* – Revolution, the popular, even the figure of Bolívar himself – there remain rather stark limits to their malleability.

At least for the present.

In the next chapter I move to a discussion of the formation and historical transformation of myth to better appraise how these signifiers and discourses move to produce or enhance the perceived necessity and possibility of social revolution in Venezuela today. The analysis of the present chapter has suggested that it is the Bolivarian Revolution itself that ultimately has the power to ‘empty the signifiers’ that have become key to its ability to retain the ability to reshape Venezuela. Indeed, it has been at moments where it has lost sight of its mandate to reshape the country that it has lost the most institutional and social power. Recent history suggests, however, that

a failure to learn this lesson will only result in future assertions of the power of the many, either by way of explosion or exodus.

Chapter Four

The Discursive Production of a ‘Revolution’:

Bolivarianismo Today

During the 2006 Venezuelan presidential race, Manuel Rosales – running for the party he founded, A New Era (UNT for its initials in Spanish) against incumbent President Hugo Chávez of the Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) – attempted to deploy the myth of Venezuelan oil for his campaign. Building on the sense in Venezuela that petroleum is part of the national patrimony, and that its wealth belongs to the people of Venezuela, the Rosales camp developed a plan around the ‘Mi Negra’ (my black) card. The program would have distributed portions of oil profits directly to individual citizens through a debit card account, named ‘*my black*’ in reference to the color of oil and the entitlement supposedly owed individual citizens. Rosales argued in campaign speeches that the Chavista government was squandering Venezuelans’ natural, God-given right to a share of the national wealth on the citizens of other nations through highly publicized hand-outs and preferential trade deals with Cuba, Bolivia, and even the poor in the North Eastern United States and post-Katrina New Orleans.

In what turned out to be a particularly miscalculated move of packaging, the UNT campaign also enlisted Gladys Ascanio, a diminutive and grandmotherly Afro-

Venezuelan as the *mi negra* plan's mascot (Romero 2008).¹¹³ The *mi negra* campaign goes beyond the common electioneering promise of future plenty in exchange for votes. While this clientelist gesture was of course central to the campaign, it also tried to resonate with core symbols of *venezolanidad* – oil and the promise of a better future.

¹¹³ Rosales lost his bid for the presidency but remained a key player in national politics and the opposition stronghold of Zulia – the Westernmost state in the nation and the center of Venezuela's oil industry. In 2009 he fled to Peru (then under the rightwing government of Alán García) while under investigation for corruption and ties to anti-Chávez paramilitary and separatist groups.



Figure 4.1: Advertisement of ‘Mi Negra’ Program (from the author’s files, 2007. Below the check-boxed statistical data, the slogans read, "Dare yourself and Progress [with] Manuel Rosales [for] President"; 'My Black: Your chance to leave the bottom'; 'With this card, you will live better in 2007.

Rosales articulated a scheme around the myth of *Venezuelan* oil in at least four registers. Firstly, it sought to raise support for the opposition in that they would ostensibly return to Venezuelans what was rightfully *theirs* in the first place: oil and the wealth it generates. Secondly, by using a personal debit card the *mi negra* program was built on entrepreneurial values, locating the proper agent of Venezuela’s future

squarely in the modern, bourgeois, individual, liberal citizen. This implicit articulation of values directly challenged *bolivarian* values that privilege the common, sacrifice for the cause, and the privileging of the many over the few. This focus on the self-interested individual ran squarely against the socialist themes of community and solidarity being articulated by the Chávez campaign. Thirdly, in their choice of spokeswoman, the Rosales campaign symbolically identified oil wealth with the figure of a poor black woman, hoping to lure away the what had by that time become the *Chavista* base: the poor and the nonwhite. Finally, and subconsciously, the plan appealed symbolically to wealthy Venezuelans (and those who aspired to be), for whom Ascanio referenced white supremacist and patriarchal social imaginary in which Afrovenezuelans, like oil, could be *possessed*, and kept in their rightful place as servants.

The *mi negra* plan failed for a number of reasons, not least of all because most Venezuelans did not trust Rosales or his appeal to their short term self interest. The divisive racial content of the campaign was exposed when Rosales furthermore sabotaged himself in a gaff that was subsequently well publicized by the Chavista media. While on the stump with the *mi negra* platform, Rosales patronizingly patted and kissed Ascanio on the head, after which he immediately *wiped his mouth* with a handkerchief. The message delivered to Venezuelans was thus not the perhaps-intended one of cherishing and taking back what was theirs, but rather of distancing Rosales, a rich white man, from the poor, dark-skinned majority of the population.

More fundamentally, however, the *Chavistas* had already rewritten the discourse of oil in Venezuela. By dedicating oil rents to social programs and emphasizing the need to invest oil in the Venezuelan people *as a whole*, the Chávez campaign displaced the centrality of the entrepreneurial individual in public life. Rosales's deployment of the myth of oil and oil wealth thus smacks of nostalgia for an era of cutthroat capitalism, corruption, and social decay in which a few Venezuelans benefited at the expense of the majority.

This is not to imply the *Chavista* approach to oil is not without its mythical attributes. As I will argue later, the Chávez program vis-à-vis oil in fact reiterates a long-standing tradition in Venezuelan policy and public discourse that centers on export-led development – one that has failed in the past and may indeed be faltering today. Nor does it imply that the failure of the Rosales campaign's deployment of a mythological trope is the result of a post-ideological politics in Venezuela. Quite the contrary, myth is alive and well in Venezuela today. If anything, the Bolivarian Revolution signals a return to an ideology – to a belief in the value of the common, of class struggle, of the belief that anti-imperialism and international solidarity can win a battle against the individualizing and inegalitarian effects of the 'free market' – after the disarray and cynicism of the lost decades of neoliberal restructuring.¹¹⁴ Myths, I will argue, are key to the production of a *habitus* in which this ideology – this discourse, or better, this constellation of discourses – can take hold and articulate subjects in the project of Bolivarian 'Socialism for the Twenty-First Century.'

¹¹⁴ In the following chapter I discuss in much greater depth what neoliberalism meant in Venezuela and what today's ostensibly 'post-neoliberal' moment promises.

The first three chapters of this dissertation examined how power circulates through the state and social movements in contemporary Venezuela, and how these changing dynamics have situated, aided, and hindered the Bolivarian process domestically and internationally. This chapter engages directly with Bolivarianismo as a practice and an emerging ideological formation. I contend that Bolivarianismo is better considered as a suturing of well-established discourses and myths that predate the actions of the current government and the socialities associated with it for generations. Put differently, this chapter examines the myths that combine and relate with one another in the social milieu of contemporary *Bolivarianismo*. In the process of this study of myth and Bolivarian ideology, I also mount a critique of the critique of ideology.

I look in particular at the cult of Simón Bolívar – the nineteenth century independence hero and founder of the Venezuelan Republic – and of the deeply intertwined myths of oil, progress, and the state. Since at least the early twentieth century when oil was discovered during thirty-year dictatorship of Juan Vicente Gómez, these three discourses have combined to provide powerful justification for a strong centralized state promising a managed pursuit of modernization for a captive, passive, body politic (Tinker Salas 2009). Yet today autonomous ‘protagonistic’ citizens have deployed these same myths in a discursive universe privileging the revolutionary transformation of society. Does this mean they are ‘empty signifiers’ – so central to the political theory of Ernesto Laclau with which the previous chapter was concerned? Might it be evidence of a *détournement* on the part of the forces aligned

with the Bolivarian process? Or, less optimistically, might we see in the reliance on past myths the limit to the Bolivarian revolution's radical potential?

This chapter thus takes the dual form of ideology critique and a larger consideration of ideology's function in revolutionary sequences. I am in other words interested both in the content and function of Bolívar, oil, the state, and progress in the formation of collective subjectivities as well as the deeper question of myth and ideology's compatibility with what one might loosely describe as revolutionary Marxism in Venezuela today. In the next section I begin with this second set of questions, analyzing the function of myth and ideology. I then move to a consideration of oil, progress and the petrostate, and Bolívar. My task in these sections will not be to produce definitions or even genealogies of these myths. In fact, it is my contention that their historical persistence and malleability renders such a task impossible. Rather, in these sections on three myths that have been key to the definition of both *Bolivarianismo* and 'Venezuelan-ness,' I trace their functions in establishing a sense of the possible in Venezuela at different conjunctures. I close the chapter by returning to the question of ideology and myth today, arguing that ideology is neither over nor negative in the context of the Bolivarian Revolution.

I. Myth, Ideology, and Revolution

At its most elemental, myth as I am considering it in this chapter serves to reproduce and reinforce lifeworlds. Myths are constitutive elements of what Pierre Bourdieu (1977) calls the *habitus*, in this sense, "the product of history" that "produces individual and collective practices, and hence history in accordance with the schemes

engendered by history” (82). Writing about Latin America specifically, Jon Beasley-Murray (2011) highlights the way in which habitus operates through “repeated practices that seem commonsensical precisely because they are undertaken without ever coming fully to consciousness [...] habitus is ‘the social made body,’ that is, social principles invested directly in the body ‘below the level of calculation and even consciousness, beneath discourse and representation” (177). However, just because the habitus is prediscursive at the level of conscious action does not indicate it is somehow natural or prepolitical. Quite the contrary. Myths and discourses circulate within a given habitus precisely in order to naturalize it, to reinforce it, and to reproduce it.

It is for this reason that myth often gets dismissed as ideology, or an element of false consciousness. Ideology is of course itself notoriously hard to define. Raymond Williams (1985) notes it is usually used “as a term of abuse,” in that “sensible people rely on experience, or have a philosophy; silly people rely on ideology” (157). To be ‘ideological’ is in popular usage to accuse someone of being dogmatic, or of lacking the ability to think for oneself. To be immersed in a mythology, then is to be similarly misguided, often to the point of being considered ‘backward’ or premodern. This has been all the more so the case among those strains of the Marxist left (particularly before the so-called postmodern turn) who saw their task as bringing the consciousness and ethics of labor into correspondence with their own objective, material, interests as the basis for revolutionary action.

It is the Marxist left that I am particularly concerned with in this chapter, as the Bolivarian process in Venezuela identifies itself as a liberatory sequence that proclaims Marx as one of its inspirations forces. In this section, I will address three positions taken by Marxists in relation to myth in order to frame the rest of the chapter's discussion of oil, progress and the state, and Bolívar as constituent elements of contemporary *Bolivarianismo*. The first position battles ideology wherever it can be found, identifying it with a false consciousness that forces the oppressed to collaborate in their oppression. The second, more recent disposition, argues that the contemporary moment is a fundamentally 'post-ideological' and cynical one. This position contends that theorizations of ideology and myth mischaracterize the way in which power circulates through and produces socialities, reinforcing the claim of liberal social contractualism that order is based fundamentally on consent. A third relation to myth is more central to the revolutionary tradition of the interwar period, best characterized by the Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui, and French syndicalist Georges Sorel. This position argues myth is necessary to inspire the volunteerism necessary for any successful revolution.¹¹⁵ In the language of this dissertation, the first approach understands myth to be an apparatus of capture by which constituted power absorbs the creative but inchoate powers of the multitude. Mythologies are central elements in the production of a *pueblo* and the domestication of the possible in favor of the stable and same. The second approach takes a number

¹¹⁵ Each was looking to Lenin and the Bolsheviks for inspiration without submitting to the required conformity of the 'scientific' Marxist-Leninism that was then forming in the Communist International of the Stalin years.

of related forms, either contending that modern nation-building projects have (always) failed, that mythologies are fundamentally hegemonic articulations that cannot account for the subaltern residue, or that power operates through coercion much more than consent. Finally, the third approach sees in myth a mobilizing, agitating force that encourages the expansion and expression of the power of the multitude.

In the Preface to *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels (Marx and Engels 1998) lay out the general trajectory the first disposition toward myth and ideology would take:

Hitherto men have always formed wrong ideas about themselves, about what they are and what they ought to be. They have arranged their relations according to their ideas of God, of normal man, etc. The products of their brains have got out of their hands. They, the creators, have bowed down before their creations. Let us liberate them from the chimeras, the ideas, the dogmas, imaginary beings under the yoke of which they are pining away. Let us revolt against the rule of concepts (29).

Ideology – created by humans – has served to alienate humanity from the means to properly apprehending the world. The task of the historical materialist is thus more than the pursuit of truer ideas, but of campaigning against the reign of ideas *tout court*. Against idealisms of all sorts the Marxist is tasked both with exposing the lies of ideology and – remembering the famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach – of battling the real material relations of inequality these ideologies support. Ideology and by extension myth is thus conceived as performing a conservative or backward oriented role.

The traditional Marxist attack on ideology and myth has by and large been steeped in the critique of religion as an ‘opiate of the masses,’ but in the original

iterations go beyond a mere critique of European Christendom and into a more generalized attack on idealisms that negate historical materialism. Religion, however, was seen as the supporting structure *par excellence* for the inequality of European and colonial societies when considered in its complex articulation with discourses that might seem mutually exclusive such as the ‘scientific’ racism and cutthroat liberal capitalism of the late nineteenth century. In places like Latin America, the Catholic Church (and later, Evangelical protestant sects) preached obedience to one’s worldly masters as conduct of a proper Christian. This position, rooted in the church’s powerful status in the Spanish and Portuguese colonial apparatuses as land owners and powerbrokers only intensified generations later against the threat of godless communism during the Cold War.¹¹⁶

This familiar critique of religion and politics in Latin America has come under question since the 1950s and the advent of Liberation Theology (Lowy 1996). What is more, with the emergence of new forms of cultural protest and identity formation practices that were once denounced as escapist or as betraying a false consciousness have called for a revision of previous approaches to resistance and revolution in the Americas and beyond. Better, now that academics and activists are *locating* and articulating resistance in places and practices that do not correspond with traditional sites of ‘the political’ – that is, outside of the state apparatus and increasingly in the ‘private sphere’ of personal relations and power dynamics, in the all encompassing

¹¹⁶ See Dussel (1981) for a historical and theological account of the Church’s role in both reproducing inequality and domination as well as in liberation movements throughout its five hundred years in the region.

market, and in virtual spaces mediated by communications technologies. The ‘real’ of historical and material relations (of production, for example) has been recognized as perhaps only ever establishing the ultimate ground of political relations, and political theory has in turn had to respond to the changes on the ground established by social movement praxis (S. Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar 1998; Canclini 2009; García-Canclini 1995).

Twentieth century Liberation Theology aside, this chapter contends that though myth and religion are conceptually distinct, the position of historical materialism to them in Latin America has all too often conflated them as enemies of the class struggle.¹¹⁷ “Myth,” writes Roland Barthes (1972), “is a form of speech” (109). As such, he continues, “everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse. Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message: there are formal limits to myth, there are no substantial ones” (109). In contemporary bourgeois social formations, *everything* can be or become myth in that *everything is discursive*. This amounts to more than the assertion that many even competing meanings can be affixed to particular objects, events or characters in history regardless of their concrete substance. It is rather to suggest that meanings and

¹¹⁷ Indeed, for all the celebration of Liberation Theology among many in the Latin American and Latin Americanist left, it is important to underline the current’s insurgent, *multitudinous* status within the official Catholic Church. See for example Kirk (1985) on attempts by (especially) Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI (the latter in his role at the time as head of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith – the modern title for the institution responsible for the Inquisition) to isolate and eradicate Liberation Theology, often with fatal consequences for its practitioners.

objects are themselves objects of discourse, tied together in a relation of mutual constitution.

Barthes's characterization of myth is thus distinct from an undertheorized 'false consciousness' in which subalterns or otherwise oppressed subjects act against their own objective and fundamental interests because they lack a grasp on 'the truth.' Rather, Barthes argues that – as form – myth “does not suppress the meaning [of the mythologized object], it only impoverishes it, it puts it at a distance, it holds it at one's disposal” (118). Myth “*hides nothing*: its function is to distort, not to make disappear...there is no need of an unconscious in order to explain myth” (121, emphasis in original). Myth erases nothing, it only distorts by drawing on the very desires of the subject it has in turn helped to create, enticing them to 'play along' with a given social order.

For Barthes it is absolutely necessary to engage in ideology critique – to study myth, to trace its origins, its affects, and its structures within contemporary societies. However, myth in the final analysis always remains counterrevolutionary. Barthes seeks to overcome the effects of bourgeois ideology by enacting “a reconciliation between reality and men, between description and explanation, between object and knowledge” (159). The full stakes of this proscription comes in *Mythologies* in a subsection on 'Myth on the Left.'¹¹⁸ Here Barthes argues, in perhaps the most

¹¹⁸ By the point in the text in which Barthes tackles the question of myth on the left, he has already: 1. Pitted myth as corrupting, parasitic and defrauding against *poetry* as trying to bridge the gap between language and meaning, arguing “the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an *artificial myth*” (135); 2. Outlined the expansive and adaptive power of bourgeois ideology,

Heideggerian moment of the text, there is “one language which is not mythical...the language of man as a producer...revolutionary language proper cannot be mythical. Revolution is defined as a cathartic act meant to reveal the political load of the world: it *makes* the world” (146). Put differently, there can be myth on the left only to the extent to which the left is not (or is no longer) *building* a positive sociality while carrying out the negating work of debunking myth. More maximally, “the bourgeoisie hides the fact that it is the bourgeoisie and thereby produces myth; revolution announces itself openly as revolution and thereby abolishes myth” (146). Rather than claiming to have access to an unsullied reality and to give the lie to bourgeois myth, revolution constructs a new world *through* the properly apprehended ideological bourgeois one it inhabits.

It is here that Barthes acknowledges his limit, despite the brilliant ideology critique that has kept *Mythologies* so important for so long. He ends the essay “not yet see[ing] a synthesis between ideology and poetry (by poetry I understand, in a very general way, the search for the inalienable meaning of things)” (159). The reader is left wanting, waiting for the advent of the revolutionary abolition of myth, of an end to the alienation inherent of bourgeois society. Barthes’s recourse to poetry, or more properly speaking, to an authentic relation among subjects and objects in the world (to paraphrase, to ‘speak’ rather than ‘speak about’ the tree) falls back into a messianic hope of a world in which words and things correspond seamlessly, where the excessive

epitomized by its ability to establish its hegemony while simultaneously making itself anonymous; and, 3. Established the function of myth as that of dehistoricizing and depoliticizing – that is, naturalizing – speech.

element of misidentification inherent in language no longer *is*. It is in other words itself a myth.

In a much different approach to myth and ideology a number of contemporary critiques of power contend that we are in a fundamentally post-ideological moment, either because of the pastiche and irony of postmodernism or, more directly related to the peregrinations of *Bolivarianismo*, that the nation-building projects of nineteenth and twentieth Latin America have (always) failed. In these circumstances, the status of myth takes a number of competing forms. Ideals such as the nation or progress once crystallized in the figure of Simón Bolívar as a symbol that has also crystallized what are now considered to be anachronistic signs of white, rich, heterosexual dominance over the queer, the indigenous, the autochthonous. This approach is also often skeptical of the Bolivarian process, as it is of any statist project, due to the ways in which it sometimes resembles these older social formations (Beasley-Murray 2011; McCoy 2010).

The Latin American Subaltern Studies Group articulated a number of these questions in an attempt to establish ethically viable – that is, supportive of liberatory struggles – positions in the wake of an early 1990s calamitous for both the regional and global left (Mallon 1994; Rodríguez 2001). Neither time, space, nor the demands of the present chapter allow for a full recounting of this rich and fractious moment.¹¹⁹ The most important aspect of the Subalternist critique in the Latin American context is the recognition that the grand modernizing narratives of the nineteenth and

¹¹⁹ For a more general account, see the collections edited by Poblete (2003) Moraña, et al (2008) and Rodríguez and López (2001).

twentieth century, these great ‘citizen machines,’ were inevitably incomplete affairs (González Stephan 2001). In Gareth Williams’s (2002) characterization, the construction of national identities always in fact excluded as much as it incorporated and narrativized. This “other side of the popular” persists, undermining the state-generated claims that the national – mestizo or Creole – community corresponds to the republican ideal of inclusion, participation, and representation at both the social and political levels.

From this point of view, the neoliberal restructuring of the 1980s and 1990s should not be seen as a new economic assault on the region, nor as an attack on the experiments with mass democracy of the so-called populist or Import-Substituting Industrialization models of the mid-twentieth century. Neoliberalism was from this perspective rather an *extension* of an already-existing Eurocentric epistemological, economic, and political organization of the world. However, rather than combating the ideologies of domination – capitalism, colonialism, modernization – with counter-ideologies of liberation – Marxism, national liberation, endogenous development – thinkers associated with this tendency argue that all too often liberatory articulations unwittingly reproduce the exclusion of non-European forms of life (see for example Grosfoguel 2007). This line of critique is thus not ‘post-ideological’ in the sense that ideology is at this point somehow over and done with. Rather, the analyses and positions of the Subalternists and the coloniality/modernity group serve the largely critical role of exposing the lingering negative effects of previous ideologies on the present – up to and including a critique of the very idea of ‘Latin America’ itself as a

construct by which the white Creole Republic is defined by its proximity to ‘modern’ Europe and its distance from the African and indigenous peoples that make up the majority of the population (Mignolo 2005).

From this perspective, then, the status of myth is rather similar to that outlined by Marx and Barthes – regardless of the distance many participants in these debates would like to put between themselves and Europe. The ‘idea’ of Latin America itself is a myth, one that obscures and naturalizes the division of power and wealth at regional and global levels (Mignolo 2000; Quijano and Wallerstein 1992). Insofar as myths operate to produce citizenship they recreate a process whereby the individual’s ego violently conquers the bestial and dumb flesh of the indigenized body (Maldonado-Torres 2007). Even ‘revolution’ from this perspective replicates heterosexist norms of domination and mastery (Saldaña-Portillo 2003). And this list of critical maneuvers could of course go on. However, in all cases here these signs – national liberation, the civic and the public, revolutionary heroism – all obscure more fundamental social identities and positions. The task of the critic then is to excavate the power relations lurking beneath ideological representation, to highlight its failures, and to push toward more authentic and authentically liberatory orderings and imaginaries. If not ‘post-ideological,’ then, ‘de-ideological.’

In his critique of hegemony theory, Jon Beasley-Murray (2011) forms something of a bridge between this second, ‘post-ideological’ position and the final, multitudinous, approach. Building on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Gilles Deleuze, and Antonio Negri, Beasley-Murray contends that political power does not operate

through the ideological manufacture of consent. Instead, power circulates through habit and affect. The question is thus not that of coercion or consent but rather of the habitus. The *habitus* relates to habit and the formation of the social for Beasley-Murray in that it constitutes a common sense that delimits and enables behavior and revolutionary insofar as any mode of life of the multitude operates through immanent habit and action. Thus they can be both conservative, the sense in which they are most often considered, sanctioning modes of life and proscribing action and bodies. While Beasley-Murray would certainly not ignore this conclusion, he also contends that “habit’s persistence (...) also generates its own form of resistance” in so far as habitus and habit are always inertial results of the past, meaning they result in fictions and dislocations as they encounter new circumstances.

Thus Beasley-Murray, following in many ways Slavoj Žižek’s (2009) critique of ideology, contends that the understanding of ideology as false consciousness (and hence of myth as mystification) is no longer an issue. Against the old Marxist contention that ideology results in a situation in which ‘they know not what they do, that is why they are doing it’ today’s reality is much more cynical or indifferent: ‘they know what they are doing and yet they are doing it anyway.’ Žižek then turns to Lacanian psychoanalysis in order to identify the constitutive lack in the social subject and its relation to an ideology that does not obscure reality but is rather constitutive of reality. Beasley-Murray (2011) has a different emphasis, however, and reads ideology as symptomatically anticipating its own failure. “Throughout modernity, the state’s aim has been to convert the multitude into the people, to remind its citizens of their

promises, and to establish consent to consent, the hegemony of hegemony” (242). However, “a latent distrust still surrounds the concept of the popular, as though to acknowledge that behind the people lurks the multitude, and that the risk of appealing to popular forces is that the multitude may break out and overwhelm the state” (242). The resulting ‘post-ideological’ condition recognizes that the real stuff of governance and power is reinforcing the common sense affect (the habitus) that what is at play in politics is consent and representation. However, each mythical or otherwise affective deployment of this notion runs the risk of undermining the viability of the very structures they seek to shore up.

Against analyses that see myth and ideology as incompatible with revolution (or, less dramatically, with social change that benefits those excluded by contemporary order *in their own terms*), as well as those that argue the first approach is outdated in that we are now in a fundamentally disenchanting, cynical age, a third approach contends that myth is fundamental to the formation of revolutionary subjectivity and the execution of revolutionary action. What is most striking about the accounts of José Carlos Mariátegui and Georges Sorel for the purposes of this dissertation is the way in which their accounts suggest that myth *mobilizes* individual and collective bodies toward particular actions through a futural projection. Myth here *pulls* as much as it pushes or blocks, establishing the ground upon which reality itself is established. While this position would seem to open itself to the critique levied by Barthes and others that myth is therefore fundamentally conservative, or at least in Bourdieu’s (1977) estimation that myth serves “at once divide and unify, legitimating

unity in division, that is to say, hierarchy,” (165) this misses, however, “that habit can be revolutionary, that revolutionaries must have their own habits, and that there is an ambivalence to habit in that at the same time as it ensures social reproduction it also enables creative constitution. So we move toward the concept of the multitude, a subjectivity that consolidates itself through habit” (Beasley-Murray 2011, 217). In other words, this position challenges ideology critique for its lingering mythical-messianic hope for an unmediated relation between bodies and world and words and things. Beasley-Murray also seeks a path beyond mediation, but does so *not* through the critique of false consciousness, but rather through an analysis attuned to habit, to the mundane and immanent creative collaboration and revolutionary action in the common. It is, in other words, the becoming-multitudinous of myth.

Among other things, in his *Reflections on Violence* Georges Sorel (1999) highlights this grounding dynamic of myth in the context of revolutionary social transformation. In response to Gustave Le Bon, who contended that crowds and mobs were fundamentally conservative (if not reactionary) in nature, Sorel contends that this is only the case in those societies lacking an idea of class struggle (124). As he notes elsewhere, Marx’s conceptualization of bipolar class struggle between labor and capital would never live up to any degree of ethnographic scrutiny. Rarely if ever do worker and capital square off directly or solely without the intervention of other positions.¹²⁰ Understood mythically, however, such a notion serves to *project* a unity

¹²⁰ And also therefore bracketing for the time being Schmitt’s (1996) understanding of the political as the situation in which the world’s inevitable multiple antagonisms boil down to a decision between two choices.

and direction in the context of struggle. Myths are therefore as much about framing a future as they are about describing, obfuscating, or reinforcing a present according to a vision of the past or an abstract model of ‘the political’ (115).

For Sorel the fundamental myth was of course the general strike and proletarian violence, the latter understood in opposition to bourgeois ‘force.’ That is to say, force is understood by Sorel – and later, by Mariátegui – as the means by which a given social order is imposed and reproduced among all sectors of a given society. Violence, for Sorel, is the act in which the proletariat destroys the bourgeoisie and its state, at once abolishing themselves and their enemy in the act of founding a classless society (165). The general strike is thus constituent power at its purest, destroying barriers and divisions while founding new, expansive modes of social organization and interaction. The general strike as myth is not a “description of things but [an] expressio[n] of a will to act” (28). Without such mobilizing and constituting myths, revolutionary will is replaced by a mechanistic view of history and social change that only serve to reinforce existing hierarchies.

Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui (2011) seized on this contribution to revolutionary Marxist thought in the 1920s, recognizing that the class composition of Latin America did not reflect that of Europe, rendering economic strategies based on the workplace actions of the industrial proletariat ineffective at best and at worst, as ultimately reinforcing the status quo (183). Mariátegui readily acknowledged his debt to Sorel, who he considered with Marx and Lenin to be the most important thinkers of socialist revolution (130). For Mariátegui, myth serves the dual function of

mobilization-projection while adapting the necessity and dynamics of class struggle to the particularity of Latin America.

It is through the imagination of myth rather than the objective mechanisms of an idealized history that a class “become[s] an instrument of its realization” (401). In an idiom more germane to the sections that follow, myths such as the figure of Bolívar “celebrate the victory of the imagination” (400) over conservative common sense and spur on future reinvention and action – regardless of their content in a given moment. Thus for example, ‘Inca Communism’ – usually cited as evidence of Mariátegui’s particularly indigenist Marxism, cuts against the reigning liberal and ‘modernist’ notion of the ‘backwards Indian’ as well as the orthodox Marxist privileging of the industrial proletariat. By emphasizing the collectivist and commoning aspects of Incan life – at the grassroots, not among the ruling classes – Mariátegui avoids either form of cultural imperialism *and* lays the roots for a common, local, identity to nourish a coming communism (73). Elsewhere, Mariátegui distances himself from the romanticizing racism of ‘Incan wisdom’ and other forms of mysticism. “I do not believe in the supernatural powers of the Incas” (95), he writes. The notion of ‘Incan Communism’ is not a static or past-oriented identity politics, but rather a means by which Mariátegui can critique *both* Spanish colonial feudalism, the racial and geographical hierarchies of which still dominated the scene in capitalist, postcolonial, but still feudal Peru, *as well as* the liberal Creole republic that followed it *while* positing the ground on which a new collective revolutionary subject could emerge.

Myth and Imagination, however, have their own relation to what we might cheekily describe as the Lacanian Real. Without myth, “the history of humanity has no sense of history. [...] The crisis of bourgeois civilization appeared obvious from the moment that this civilization displayed its lack of myth” (384). However, all these projections of futures without the catastrophic influences of capitalism and lingering colonial-imperial designs are without guarantee. There is no ‘final struggle,’ and “the messianic millennium will never come. People arrive only to leave again. It cannot, however, dispense with the belief that a new day is the final day. No revolution ever foresees the revolution that comes next, even though it contains the seeds of it” (390). The general strike or the social revolution cannot guarantee a result, nor can they explain in the present a utopia for the future. They cannot make full and complete the lack and division of society. Yet, these myths both propel us forward and give hope. Without the belief that one can ‘traverse the real’ without acting ‘as-if’ no revolution will be possible. *Hic Rodus, Hic Salta*. Myth is necessary and Myth is necessarily multitudinous.

As we shall see in what follows shortly, Bolívar, oil, and progress have all historically served as myths – in the senses both used and critiqued by Mariátegui and Sorel. Myth has historically served to reinforce a common sense or a habitus that not only establishes limits of the possible in a given situation but also renders those limits unthinkable. It has also been prone to slippage, redefinition, lines of flight that have fueled revolutionary action perhaps even more effectively than they did the *ancien regime*. In the following three sections I sketch genealogies of these three myths as they

have circulated through and against iterations of the state in Venezuela, highlighting the degree to which they have both served to undermine themselves and reinforce what I described in Chapter Two as the global division of legitimacy (that is, how they have served to check constituent power) and more recently how they have ‘become multitudinous,’ displaying a ‘habit’ of the multitude that continually refounds itself even as it strikes forward against the barriers that would contain it.

II. ‘Sembrar el Petróleo’: Oil and the Myth of Progress

The possibility for metaphors is almost endless. Oil *fueled* Venezuelan development in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Oil *lubricated* Venezuela’s ‘exceptional democracy,’ ensuring a modicum of social harmony between classes and races. Oil has *seeped* into the very substance of Venezuelan identity. Throughout 2007, the Bolivarian Revolution developed the slogan of the ‘Five Motors,’ and ‘full speed ahead!’ in the pursuit of Socialism for the twenty-first century: internal combustion propelled Venezuela forward.

As I illustrated in Chapter Two, a global consensus has been crafted – both intentionally and as a consequence of the capitalist world system’s division of labor and nature – in which oil and the Venezuelan nation stand together in a relation of intense metonymy (Coronil 1997). Oil is why Venezuela is so important to the world economy and to the United States, with proven reserves among the top ten largest in the world. Roughly 11 percent of the crude oil imported by the United States is

Venezuelan (Alvarez and Hanson 2009).¹²¹ At the same time, oil has been an excuse for commentators on the right to dismiss the Bolivarian Revolution as an anomaly: unexportable and unsustainable, so therefore unsupportable. In Jorge Castañeda's (2006) estimation, "Chávez is not Castro; he is Perón with oil" (38). Two faces of the same basic fact: Venezuela and its place in the global imaginary are determined by its chief export.

In this section I sketch the limits, both real and imaginary, of oil in Venezuela throughout the Twentieth and into the Twenty-first centuries and its contribution to contemporary *Bolivarianismo*. While it may perhaps seem intuitive that oil would take on mythological features, and be associated directly with progress and material wealth due to its centrality to all aspects of the global market, I will augment this very real dynamic with a second, perhaps less obvious one. Building on the analysis of Fernando Coronil, Miguel Tinker Salas and on the Venezuelans I lived and worked with throughout 2007 and 2008, I will argue there exists a subterranean and self-defeating thread to the myth of oil in Venezuela. This thread, I will argue, has as much to do with an internalization of, to paraphrase Coronil, the 'global division of labor and hence, of nature,' as well as the most coherent attempts to expel such an internalization. The result is a paradoxical status of oil as myth in Venezuela today. Oil is seen as a challenge as much as a blessing.

¹²¹ This amounts to a roughly two-thirds share of Venezuela's export market and makes Venezuela the third largest provider of oil to the United States behind Mexico and Canada.

In Venezuela itself, oil and the state have historically been linked for reasons having to do with culture, power, and the intricacies of a primary product export economy. Long before 1976, when Carlos Andrés Pérez nationalized the oil industry during his first presidency, access to oil was controlled by the state, making the national government the most powerful native business interest in the country. Throughout the twentieth century, writes Fernando Coronil (1997), oil was both the “transcendent and unifying agent of the [Venezuelan] nation.” As a result,

Venezuela was seen as having *two bodies*, a political body made up of its citizens and a natural body made up of its rich subsoil. By condensing within itself the multiple powers dispersed throughout the nation’s two bodies, the state appeared as a single agent endowed with the *magical* power to remake the nation...throughout the nineteenth century the fragile Venezuelan state, chronically assaulted by regional caudillos, was unable to impose its control over the fragmented national territory. It was only when it was transformed into a mediator between the nation and the foreign oil companies in the early twentieth century that the state acquired the political capacity and financial resources that enabled it to appear as an independent agent capable of imposing its dominion over society (5, emphasis added).

The Venezuelan state apparatus and the pursuit of oil rents have not merely *become* intertwined. Historically, they have been one and the same thing. This is the strange nature of *Venezuelan* oil and its dialectical self-undermining. Oil is the most substantive component of the modern national body, but it is also has been conceived as the means by which the nation can move beyond its current, deficient, status. As an agent both constitutive and independent of the political (that is, human) body of the nation, oil has been an intense figure of anxiety in Venezuela, simultaneously and famously

considered the key to modernization and as ‘the devil’s excrement.’¹²² Oil will either propel the nation to modernity, or bring about the erosion of moral fiber, global financial subservience, and ecological catastrophe.

Three snapshots of this relation to oil illustrate the way in which oil is seen as both something to which all Venezuelans are entitled as a birthright, and to the conflicted nature of this inheritance:

Glen, a middle class, university-educated, pro-Chávez, first generation Venezuelan friend described the general opinion of the late 1970s – the last oil boom before the Chávez years – as so optimistic that it was widely held one “had to try not to make money.” These were the years where Venezuela was known as ‘Venezuela Saudita’ – Saudi Venezuela – an oasis of calm and prosperity in an ocean of poverty, dictatorship, and civil war. Indeed, Glen’s family moved to Venezuela from Scotland to work in the expanding oil sector. Glen recounted this to me as we were making our way from central Caracas on the ever-congested and anarchic Autopista Francisco Fajardo, the major cross-town thoroughfare. Traffic on the autopista was nearly always at a standstill, and informal laborers – known in Venezuela as *buhoneros* – walked between cars selling everything from coffee in little plastic cups to plastic ‘Dora the Explorer’ backpacks; so many different forms of oil surrounding us in Glen’s idling SUV. Glen supported the government, and supported the move toward

¹²² See Naím (2009) for a recent iteration of ‘the resource curse’ narrative of Venezuela and other oil states’ difficulties in ‘developing’ and ‘modernizing.’ The 1960’ s-era oil minister Juan Pablo Perez Alfonzo, supposedly coined the phrase ‘the devil’s excrement,’ also the title of a vehemently anti-Chávez blog featured on salon.com, after his time in office.

socialism, but was pessimistic about the country's chances of success, particular in its state goals to diversify and industrialize the Venezuelan economy.

Frustrated with the traffic and muttering something under his breath about the ubiquity of automobiles and cheap gas, Glen finished on what struck me as a strange note, considering the way the *buhoneros* were hustling on the congested freeway, "No one works. No one wants to work. They feel entitled and feel cheated if they aren't rich."

When I suggested that everyone seemed to be working to me, particularly the folks walking between cars, selling random trinkets, he laughed, "they're all Colombian, of course."

*

Edgar, an unemployed, barrio resident, Chavista friend with no formal education whom I met through my work with Misión Ribas in the Western Caracas district of La Vega described his country's oil wealth in terms of class conflict. We were sitting on the path outside his front door to a concrete bunker of a home located near the top of one of Caracas's many barrio-filled hills. When I asked if Venezuela was a rich country, he was incredulous, insisting that Venezuela was the richest country in the world. The problem is that "they have always had [the money] for themselves, I used to work *down there* [he gestures to the city below], I know how *they* live. They aren't going to just give up all that wealth, that luxury. The cars, the malls, the McDonald's. They're selfish; they don't care about us, the pueblo. We have to fight for what is ours."

*

My vehemently anti-Chavista landlord – always good for a pithy summary of the entirety of his country’s past, present and future – responded to my infinite difficulties in obtaining an official work visa with a resigned, “It’s a third world country.” After a conversation that stretched from complaints about ineffective bureaucracy and a recent spate of power outages, I pointed out that Venezuela’s oil wealth gave it a lot more opportunities than, for example, Guatemala.

“That’s the problem!” he laughed.

*

While it is dangerous to theorize from anecdotes, there is nonetheless a consistent concern in these encounters that is echoed by the domestic and international representations of Venezuela’s relation with oil. The first position retains echoes of the Protestant ethic of toil, trouble, and earned reward. It also reinforces the discourse of North Atlantic capitalist modernity, a narrative that proclaims the autogenesis of European development and naturalizes its disproportionate benefit in the global capitalist system. Glen thus unwittingly echoes and accepts the European Whig-history of the global economic system: with enough elbow grease and entrepreneurial effort, discipline, and sobriety, you too can reach the commanding heights. At the same time, and never lurking far behind, Glen’s observation echoes a long-held global and local myth.

In the early days of the petroleum industry in Venezuela, local (by and large white) elites and foreign oil companies feared local ‘peons’ could not be transformed

into responsible, disciplined workers. As Miguel Tinker Salas (2009) notes, “foreigners assumed the characteristic role of modernizers, confronted by a ‘backward’ labor force that had to be transformed” (95).¹²³ The habits of modernity had to be *imported* to Venezuela through the intervention of foreign agents. The impossibility of the myth’s fulfillment – the development of the Venezuelan and his or her arrival at a status equal to the modern European imaginary – can be seen in the way in which Glen’s frustration bespeaks a sense of unworthiness. Venezuela has not developed or ‘caught up’ with Europe and the United States not only because *it has not earned it* but rather *because it cannot*. Oil is ‘easy money,’ reminiscent of Montesquieu’s climatological explanation of equatorial ‘poverty’ and indolence. Whether a matter of climate or easy wealth, the punch line remains the same: Venezuela does not enjoy the same quality of life or global stature as Europe; modernity is a status that Venezuela cannot and does not deserve.

The second statement, Edgar’s, places the blame for the maldevelopment of the Fourth Republic on the shoulders of the wealthy. Also reflected in the popular term for today’s opposition, *escuálido* (weak, emaciated), the poor majority of Venezuela argue that the country’s traditional elite have squandered the opportunities every Venezuelan inherits as a birthright. Like Glen’s Weberian overtones, Edgar contends that lack of work and discipline is the characteristic of the fattened classes. Rather than invest the money in the people, in the educational, health and economic

¹²³ This is reminiscent of policies throughout the region throughout the mid to late 1800s that were guided by the principle “gobnar es poblar” – to govern is to populate, meaning that the best way to modernize their societies was for Latin American governments to increase immigration from Europe.

infrastructure necessary to make a prosperous nation, the rich historically have hoarded money selfishly, driving the country as a whole into the ground.

Edgar's assessment resonates with other popular epithets Chavistas use to characterize the opposition. *Traidor* and *vendepatria*¹²⁴ often accompany *escuálido*. The crimes of Venezuela's wealthy are thus not just on the order of economic mismanagement: the rich have betrayed the nation and the nation's future. Following Coronil's characterization of oil as a strange member of the national family, Edgar's characterization poses oil as a present fullness of possibility as well as a debt to future generations. The crimes of the opposition, in other words, are from his perspective transhistorical.

The last statement, that of my landlord, sums up a fatalistic dimension of the myth of oil in historical and contemporary Venezuela. Little did he know, he located and condensed the disavowed truth of the 'resource curse' in its essence. "This is a third world country" illustrates the global division of power and legitimacy outlined in the second chapter of this dissertation. Natural resource wealth becomes tragic: any attempt by Venezuela to use it for development is doomed to failure. Every quotidian experience reinforces this reality, even if power outages and inefficient bureaucracies can be found in the 'first world' as well as Venezuela.

This has not always been the case. In Venezuela – especially during the *puntofijo* years (but by no means the unique purview of that particular moment of the Fourth Republic) – the myth of *La Gran Venezuela* (the Great Venezuela) projected the

¹²⁴ Both terms translate roughly to 'traitor,' though the second has a particular Judas Iscariot intonation, as it implies a person who has *sold* his or her homeland.

image of a nation blessed by god and destined for a seat at the table of global powers and fully-developed economies. In the oil boom of the mid-1950s during the military rule of Marcos Pérez Jiménez the state actively rebuilt Caracas in the pursuit of a 'New National Ideal' aimed at "the 'moral, intellectual, and material improvement of the inhabitants of the country and the rational transformation of the physical environment, in order that Venezuela occupy the rank that corresponds to its geographic situation, its extraordinary riches, and glorious traditions," (Mayhall 2005, 126). Pérez Jiménez was of course merely adding his variation to a long established postcolonial script. By transforming raw and inert nature – oil – into the visible signs of modernity – megablock apartments, Haussmann-esque rationalized city planning, modernist university campuses, luxury hotels atop mountain ranges – the regime sought to perform the act of modernization in full view. Conquering nature thus became the first and most fundamental step towards the becoming-Paris of Caracas in particular and Venezuela more generally. Oil was at one and the same time a symbol of Venezuela's intimate link with a primordial nature and the vehicle through which the nation committed itself to the fantastical 'myth' of modernity (Coronil, 1997).

As early as 1936, the promise of oil already also carried with it cause for concern, as in Arturo Úslar Pietri's (1936) perennially rewritten maxim 'sembrar el petróleo (sow the oil).' Originally a caution against over reliance on a single economic activity ("...focused solely on mineral rents, what will happen can be said clearly: Venezuela will become an unproductive and idle country, a gigantic parasite on petroleum, swimming in a momentary, corrupting abundance that is doomed to fail –

an immediate and inevitable catastrophe...”),¹²⁵ ‘sembrar el petróleo’ has been used in various registers as a slogan for industrialization, education, social welfare programs and schemes to funnel money to Venezuelan businesses looking to expatriate profits.

This dictate, though repeated regularly in official, business and popular circles alike, failed to be realized throughout the years, even during the oil boom triggered in part by the Arab-Israeli wars of the late 1970s and the interventionist and developmentalist presidency of Carlos Andrés Pérez. Luis Luongo (2005), in his exhaustive twentieth century presidential history of Venezuela is characteristic of this trend, sums up the rule of Andrés Pérez thusly:

During the entire term of President Pérez there was labor peace and the quality of life of every Venezuelan citizen improved, but the perverse ‘rentista’ conception grew even more in the population, causing further damage to its ability to acquire a culture of productive, persevering and creative work – that we still do not have... (XVII)

Thus even though oil was in this last pre-Chávez boom seen to be at the root of a general increase in the quality of life in Venezuela (this may or may not have been the actual case) it was also seen as ultimately also seen to be the source of the country’s ills. In the place of the rather protestant values of production, perseverance and creativity stood the lazy ethos of the oil state: *why build it when you can buy it?*

This myth, repeated over and over again on the lips of citizens and made real in the massive public works projects of the mid-twentieth century, relied and reproduced

¹²⁵ “*Presupuesto con la sola renta de minas, lo que habría de traducir más simplemente así: llegar a hacer de Venezuela un país improductivo y ocioso, un inmenso parásito del petróleo, nadando en una abundancia momentánea y corruptora y abocado a una catástrofe inminente e inevitable.*”

the associated myth of a Venezuelan social peace. This social peace of the post-dictatorship era (that is, post 1958) depended on the ability of export-led development to reduce class conflict and instill a national interest in furthering success of the state – which was by this time not only the chief governing apparatus, but also by far the largest actor in the economy (Ellner and Tinker Salas 2007a). Oil was of course the chief fuel for this ‘Venezuelan Dream,’ and fluctuations in the oil market or (as was often the case) the mismanagement of petrol profits put the dream to the test on a number of occasions. By the time of the *caracazo* in February of 1989, these boom and bust cycles had left Venezuelan political elites devoid of vision or legitimacy, corrupt, and dependent on foreign loans.

Miguel Tinker Salas (2009) concludes his definitive study of the role of oil in Venezuelan culture in this post-*caracazo* moment as follows:

Deprived of its benefits, the majority of the population no longer viewed the industry as the instrument of development and modernization. This outcome brought to an end an important chapter in the history of Venezuela. A new chapter, however, has not fully materialized, and it remains unclear what shape it will take. Though the economy and the government continue to rely exceedingly on the oil industry, the reality is that in contemporary Venezuela oil no longer functions as an irrational symbol of identity (250).

He argues, in short, that the myth of oil paving the royal road to modernity and development is as dead and gone as the *puntofijo* system that required and reproduced it on such a fundamental level. While Tinker Salas notes that Venezuela has yet to open a new chapter, the conclusion that oil “no longer functions as an irrational symbol of identity” is too hasty. In the emerging discourses of ‘Socialism for the Twenty-First Century’ Venezuela’s self-aware role as the vanguard of a retooled and

reinvigorated global left – Chávez, for example, called for the convocation of a ‘Fifth Socialist International’ in November 2009 – is in no small way based on its ample oil reserves. Bolivarian foreign economic policy, on which much most of the country’s foreign policy is determined, centers on humanitarian and ‘socialist’ exchanges of oil for, for example, Cuban doctors. What is more, the Bolivarian Revolution has benefited from the relatively high oil prices on the global market for most of its tenure, which has allowed for a democratization of consumption (of oil rents) without having to significantly decrease the status and bottom lines of the wealthy. It has, in other words, allowed for one part of the country to embark on the road to socialism without causing any undue inconvenience to the rich.

The myth of oil is in many ways ambivalent vis-à-vis the dynamics of constituent and constituted power. It remains a key component of contemporary *Bolivarianismo* in its operation as a referent to the past, to the inequality of the past, and the necessary and articulated class antagonism of the present. However, it also carries with it a lingering fear, or inferiority complex that resonates with the global division of labor, wealth, and legitimacy. Oil thus serves to structure two competing but perhaps not mutually exclusive *habitus* – the first a constellation that combines a belief that another world is possible with the material means and antagonistic affect necessary to construct it, the second a sort of historical determinism and self-doubt. The key in understanding oil as a myth that is ‘becoming-multitudinous’ lies in the degree to which the former serves as an impetus and not a goal and in which the latter is relegated to the dustbin of history. The extent to which this is possible has much to do

with how the myth of oil relates to, is subsumed by, or reinforces another key mythical aspect of twentieth and twenty-first century Venezuela, what Fernando Coronil (1997) described as ‘the magical state.’

III. Oil, Progress, and the State

The alchemical powers of oil have historically been tied to the central state in Venezuela. Indeed, the state has been considered a mediating step between the people, petroleum, and progress. Terry Karl (1997) describes this attitude by way of a (rather unfortunate) historical comparison, “just as Spaniards had once waited for the next ship of gold from the New World to rescue them,” she writes, in the aftermath of collapses in the international oil markets, “Venezuelans seemed to believe that another boom in black gold was just around the corner” for state-lead development to restart the economy (185). While the comparison may be ugly, the mythological content is at least immediately apparent, as is the analytical judgment. Just as the Christian god had ordained and blessed Spain’s fortunes in the ‘new world,’ so too had that same god set Venezuela on the path to development through the gift of massive oil reserves. “Dios es venezolano” – God is Venezuelan – is an often repeated, and often ironically repeated, phrase. Allegory and historical continuity aside, there has been a noted continuity in the state’s reliance on oil rents to develop the national economy from the first discovery of petroleum deposits in the early twentieth century to the present, with the oil export sector comprising increasingly dominant proportions of the GDP since its discovery in the early twentieth century.

The resulting ‘Dutch Disease,’ or ‘bonanza development’ “whereby new discoveries or favorable price changes in one sector of the economy—for example, petroleum—cause distress in other sectors—for example, agriculture or manufacturing” has defined the Venezuelan economy since the early twentieth century. The immediate and long-term result of these trends, tend to be “a rapid, even distorted, growth of services, transportation, and other nontradeables while simultaneously discouraging industrialization and agriculture” (5). The state became the chief economic actor of the country, and extracting rent from transnational energy firms became Venezuela’s chief economic activity. Karl notes, however, that this is not simply a matter of economic determinism; cultural and political factors intervene and aggravate the symptoms of the ‘disease.’

At issue for Karl is the formation of what she calls a ‘petrostate.’ The Venezuelan petrostate was for Karl the result of three factors. The first, an “absence of distinctive state interests or even of any centralized or impersonal apparatus of domination remotely resembling a modern state until very late” (72) reflects the reality of Venezuelan political history. After a particularly destructive fight for independence during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the country was immersed in civil war and the fragmented sovereignty of caudillo rule (Lynch 1992). The Venezuelan state, with a recognized capital in Caracas that was able to command obedience over the national territory and subdue the rule of local strongmen, only came about in the course of the administration of Cipriano Castro in 1899 (Silva Luongo 2005, 8).

Secondly, Karl (1997) argues that negotiations around oil concessions strengthened the role and power of the executive and undermined bureaucratic authority (72). Juan Vicente Gómez, president during the discovery of oil and the rapid expansion of the industry in the early twentieth century, already exercised dictatorial powers. “It is one of the great ironies of history,” writes Karl,

that foreign oil companies, the epitome of private enterprise, are largely responsible for the etatism characterizing Venezuelan development. The foreign companies fought against the existing system of private property rights because they believed it would reproduce some of the constraints on their activities already in evidence in the United States. Preferring to deal with one (weak) central authority, they engaged in a struggle, both legal and otherwise, to limit the authority of private landowners. Not surprisingly, Gómez sided with them. In 1912, the attorney general and the Supreme Court ruled that any rights granted to private landowners by a previous code of mines were unconstitutional. From this moment on, only the state had the authority to deal directly with foreign companies, and the private sector was permanently relegated to a secondary role (78).

By the time of the first, feeble transition to more democratic forms of governance ten years after Gómez’s death in 1936, the Venezuelan economy was wholly centered on the capture of oil rents, and the state – meaning the executive – was the key player in this economy. Economic booms in the price of petroleum, and the ten-year developmentally obsessed dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1948-58) further contributed both to the rent-seeking nature of the economy and the power of the executive.

Finally, Karl contends that these historical and institutional relations become normalized, at which point the consolidated petrostate can rely on “consensus for intervention based on the distribution of oil rents to subsidize non-oil activities” (73). Through the capture of oil rents and the distribution of the spoils, the petrostate

establishes patron-client relations between itself and the political and economic actors in the country. The petrostate is thus the entropic political face of the Dutch disease, an institutional apparatus that prevents societies from protecting themselves or correcting their economies should a sudden drop in the export markets suddenly pull the rug out from under them.

Karl's analysis has been fundamental for the study of maldevelopment and, as the title of her book suggests, a key step in the understating of 'the paradox of plenty.' However, Karl also tends to reify the internal limits of local politicians and workers, focusing on questions of "structure and agency," (223) "choice," (224) and "institutional design" (226) rather than constraints imposed on oil-producing nations by global markets. To be sure, Karl is concerned with the – especially initial – impacts that oil firms had on the institutional development of the modern Venezuelan state form, but her account fails to address what Coronil describes as the 'global division of nature' and the degree to which the subordinate and 'maldeveloped' political and economic status of countries like Venezuela is hard-wired into the modern capitalist world system.

What is more, Karl assumes a universal and linear trajectory of 'development.' The governments of Venezuela and other 'cases' considered in *The Paradox of Plenty* are certainly beset by a number of defects: corruption and poor planning being only two examples. However, there is a rather wide gap between appreciating and addressing problems in politics and society endogenously and Karl's assumption and application of the norms of 'modern' democratic states of North Atlantic vintage.

While both Coronil and Karl's analyses account for the overpowering role of global financial markets in Venezuela's internal affairs, only Coronil accounts for the mythological status of development itself. Whereas Karl assumes the dictates of development and then builds her account around the failure of Venezuela and other petrostates to 'catch up.' In other words, Karl is concerned with the 'how' questions of the petrostate's inability to develop modern governmental structures, economies, and civil societies. Coronil on the other hand bases his inquiry somewhat laterally to this concern, looking more at the question of 'why' Venezuela so desperately desired 'modernity' and why it has historically focused this desire for modernity on the outward and physical symbols of 'developed' societies. Thus, while both books offer a judgment on Venezuela and its state structure, Karl's account ultimately criticizes Venezuela for the failure to endogenously develop the structures that Coronil contends are at the heart of a colonial inferiority complex endemic to what he calls the 'division of nature' of the global economy.

As myths, then, oil, progress, and the state must carry out three functions that predate and extend into the Bolivarian present in Venezuela. First, oil plays a paradoxical role in both promising a better tomorrow and undermining the attainment of that promise. It naturalizes underdevelopment insofar as it results (predictably) in a 'petrostate' and in particular in the reinforcing of a mono-product economy, a fragile civil society, and a corrupt bureaucracy more interested in capturing and dividing rents than in developing the capacities of the nation as a whole. As a myth, in other words, oil, progress, and the petrostate compliment the

‘global division of legitimacy’ I outlined in the second chapter vis-à-vis political judgments on ‘populism.’ Secondly, and relatedly, these elements conflate and reinforce Venezuela and Venezuelans as third world subjects. Finally, and most importantly, today oil feeds a class antagonism that is increasingly read through the state. This class antagonism takes aim not only against the rich in Venezuela, but against the entire order they symbolize and its crystallization in the petrostate. In other words, whereas the myth of oil often results in a sort of internalized inferiority complex among the middle class and the anti-Chavistas, for the poor and the Bolivarians this inferiority complex and the track-record of twentieth century petro-capitalism is further evidence of their revolutionary ideology’s correctness.

IV. Plowing the Sea: The Persistently Mythological Simón Bolívar

Yo conocí a Bolívar
 Una mañana larga
 En Madrid,
 En la Boca del Quinto Regimiento.
 Padre, le dije,
 ¿Eres o no eres o quién eres?
 Y mirando al Cuartel de la Montaña
 Dijo: Despierto cada cien años
 Cuando despierta el pueblo.
 - Pablo Neruda, “Canto a Bolívar”¹²⁶

In Venezuela and throughout Latin America, Simón Bolívar – known widely as *el Libertador* for his leading role in the founding of five republics: Venezuela,

¹²⁶ "I met Bolívar/one long morning/in Madrid/in the doorway of the fifth regiment [the regiment organized by the Communist Party during the Spanish Civil War]/Father, I asked,/Are you or are you not alive or who are you?/And looking at the Montaña Barracks [where popular militias turned back a coup attempt against the Spanish Republic]/he said: I awaken every one hundred years/when the pueblo awakens."

Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia – has in many ways become an empty signifier to rival all empty signifiers and a myth to rival all myths. This has been the case historically and has been so all the more in today's *Bolivarian* Republic of Venezuela. Bolívar is able to function as a revolutionary to be followed or repeated, a strongman or authoritarian able to unify and direct the ragtag nation, as a lover, and even as a portent of inevitable failure. Just as oil's mythological function, I will argue that Bolívar the myth serves as a social link, unifying, including and excluding particular socialities from the national ideal and often illustrating the limits or function of this ideal when the myth of Bolívar exceeds its pre-established limits.

Bolívar illustrates the way in which myths are not settled objects or static, archetypal elements of identity. Myths are battlefields. One can track the battle over Bolívar as one traverses the city of Caracas, for example. In the sprawling (*chavista*) barrio 23 de Enero in the west of the city Bolívar and *Bolivarianismo* are embraced as an element of twenty first century socialism. In the posh enclaves of the opposition in the eastern parish of Chacao, Bolívar is a founder of the Enlightened Creole Republic, a leader, a symbol of Venezuela's once glorious (pre-Chávez) past. The dichotomy bleeds into the very fabric of the city. In 23 de Enero one encounters a large, government-installed billboard atop one of the dictatorship-era superblock apartment complexes celebrating the "path to Bolivarian Socialism" for all to see (see figure 4.2). In Chacao, in neat spray painted block letters, a much different perspective on *el Libertador* harangued the passer by "Bolívar no fue Comunista, carajo!" (Bolívar wasn't a communist, asshole!).



Figure 4.2 ¡Rumbo al Socialismo Bolivariano! photo by the author. The sign reads “On the path to Bolivarian Socialism.” The logo on the right features a five-pointed star with the five-steps slogan prominent at the time (2007).

Both statements attempt to give history lessons to passive observers and to interpellate subjects into a particular political trajectory. Both, in other words, attempt to articulate and reinforce their own substance to the myth of Bolívar. The billboard atop the 23 de Enero superblock rises above the city and the poor district with its chaos and poverty, a path the subject must look up and aspire to. The lettering is bold, both a triumphant exclamation and an exhortation to act.

In Venezuela there is a real sense – real both in its palpability as well as in the degree to which it corresponds to the political reality of the country – that the

conditions holding back Venezuela from building ‘Socialism for the 21st century’ are *internal* to the Bolivarian movement itself; external enemies have been bested, the (US) empire held at bay, and the right wing opposition continues to prove itself inept, unsupported and unsupportable. The danger is thus much like that Bolívar himself faced at his death. By and large, internal conditions on the South American continent saw Bolívar’s vision for a republic of nations in the Americas disintegrate into post-independence civil wars, the rule of *caudillos* and *hacendados* in place of the republican governments he designed, and the cementing of the continent’s neocolonial status in the global economic and political order.

The graffitied exhortation in Chacao, on the other hand, confronted the observer on her own level. Its message, like its placement, is direct, matter-of-fact, and crude. One confronts the message on a wall, at eye-level, almost naturally. Whereas from street level the placement and the juxtaposition of the billboard required the viewer to change their natural position, to crane their neck and adopt an upward and forward looking stance, the Chacao graffiti both monopolizes the viewer’s gaze and fades into the background of a city covered in spray painted slogans, tags, and murals. That is to say, whereas ‘¡rumbo al socialismo bolivariano!’ is self consciously performative – making the statement true by virtue of its enunciation – ‘Bolívar no fue comunista’ gestures towards common sense, attempting in effect to close and to freeze the signifier that Bolívar has become, to counter the Chavista rewriting of Venezuela’s most powerful symbol and to claim him as the rightful property of the opposition. What is more and what is truly ironic is that the medium of spray paint

suggests an oppositional commonality against the official and professionally produced billboard; a defiant and illegal assertion of a common past (the past tense, a shared history) against a professionalized ‘beyond.’

Given the intensity that characterized his life and the tragedy of its end, Bolívar has been the subject of artistic and cultural projects that have served both to amplify and refract his mythological status (Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *The General in His Labyrinth* being perhaps the most familiar to English-speaking audiences). Bolívar was born to a *mantuano* family (the name given to white plantation-owning Creoles) in Caracas in 1783. By this time, a series of administrative reforms within the Spanish Empire had exacerbated the already intense racial tensions in the colony and closed many lucrative avenues to Creole elites. Orphaned before he was ten years old, Bolívar has become a son of Caracas in the popular imaginary, and supposed to have returned to his native land dedicated to the fight for its independence after seeing the coronation of Emperor Napoleon (Bolívar was, supposedly, offended at the spectacle) and after visiting Rome (the oath uttered by Bolívar atop Monte Sacro, in which he promised to bring independence to the Americas has since been located *the* beginning of the wars of national liberation in the Americas).

The Bolivarian ideal was amplified and constantly altered in the tumultuous years spanning his death and the final emergence of a strong, centralized Venezuelan state in the early twentieth century. Throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century, Venezuela was immersed in a series of civil wars that effectively left the country in a state of checked sovereignty. Rather than pass through independence to

a modern nation-state and republic, local *caudillos* held more military and economic power than whoever happened to be in control of the central state and the economy stagnated amidst the utter devastation – in human and infrastructural terms – wrought by the 20 year battle to evict the Spanish (Lynch 1992). During this time Bolívar was alternately blamed for the dreary aftermath of independence or mourned as the retroactively recognized father and savior of the Americas. He was hailed as an ideal by enterprising strongmen for his military prowess and for the power of his symbol and denounced by liberals similarly as a bloodthirsty absolutist (Lynch 2006, 282–302).

Infamously, Karl Marx was commissioned to write an entry on Bolívar for the New American Encyclopedia in 1858. He wrote at the time to Engels that in Bolívar one could see “the most dastardly, most miserable and meanest of blackguards described” who had been inappropriately eulogized as Napoleon I. Marx concluded, “Bolívar is a veritable Soulouque” (Dunkerley 2000, 228). Marx’s analysis of Bolívar has rightfully been criticized as displaying the shortcomings of the former’s ability to think questions of colonialism and alternative trajectories of national development and revolution (see, for example Aricó 2010; Castro-Gómez 2008). Rather than entering into this debate I would like rather to posit that Marx’s thinking on Bolívar is representative of liberal and radical opinions of Bolívar and the Bolívar myth in the nineteenth century and beyond. Thus, beyond *ad hominem* attacks on either figure, what is at stake in these readings of Bolívar is precisely the way in which myth figures

into the production of revolutionary socialities and the proper course of transformation. Carlos Uribe poses the issue thusly:

The evidence allows us to suggest that Marx had set about destroying a myth, and this myth had two aspects. The first was that of collective liberation as the work of a single personality, of a charismatic individual, of 'the man of providence.' Secondly, there was the myth of 'nationality' in the manner of Mazzini – the idea of the creation of new nations as a result of the emancipation struggle against oppression by the great metropolitan powers (quoted in Dunkerley, 2000, 229).

The danger of the Bolívar myth for the left was and remains the mythological potential seemingly written into such a heroic figure in such a tumultuous time. Marx thus – his own Eurocentrism and lack of accurate sources aside – can be read as so critical of Bolívar in that the former recognizes in the latter the mythological workings of the rise of nationalism as an emerging bourgeois strategy to contain class struggle. Bolívar is thus, in this light, a profoundly anti-revolutionary myth, despite the ostensibly revolutionary content he embodies.

Yet today, Bolívar has been reimagined as a socialist, his credentials as a revolutionary who fought against foreign domination and for equality across races and classes outstripping the authoritarian and liberal-republican aspects of his historical character (see figure 4.3). Given the hybrid and piecemeal nature of the transition to socialism in Venezuela, one might be tempted to ask if the process has been more Bolivarian than Socialist in any immediately recognizable sense. As I will argue in deeper detail in the following chapter, the substance of *Bolivarianismo* has been more straightforwardly anti-neoliberal and anti-imperialist than anti-capitalist. However, the imaginary it articulates in its present mythologized form uses the figure

of Bolívar to shuttle between the disparate elements contributing to the Bolivarian process: the Liberation Theology and Christianity, the open-Marxism, the strong central state, and the democratizing emphasis on civil society (among others).

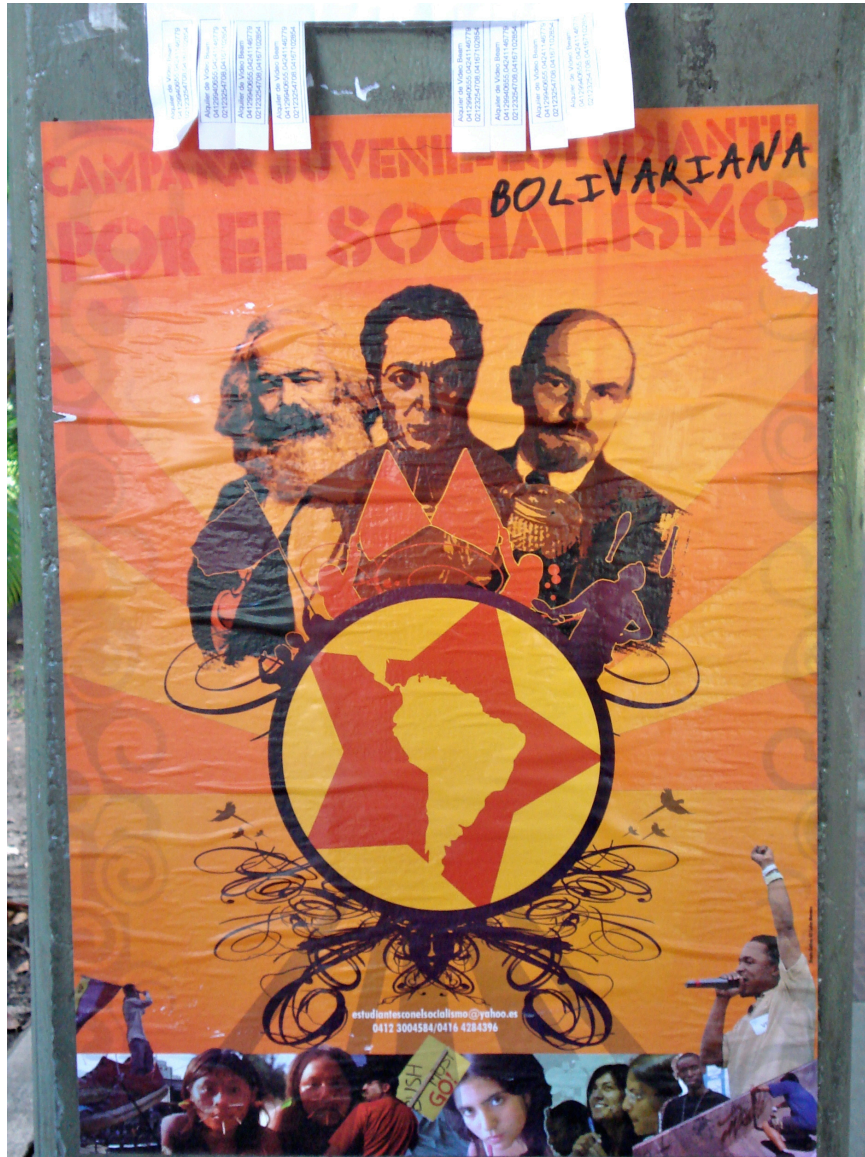


Figure 4.3. Youth and Student campaign for Bolivarian Socialism. Caracas, December 2008 (Photo by the author).

Marx, Lenin, Bolívar? This is but one of the many iterations of this sort of iconography one encounters in *chavista* corners of Caracas. Bolívar stands between Marx and Lenin, either shoulder-to-shoulder with the European revolutionaries as an equal, or perhaps even better as a bridge: Bolívar as the Latin American synthesis of theory and practice. Importantly, the historic trio is in the background. In the foreground, a crest of South America captured by a socialist red star, atop of which silhouetted figures seem to be engaging in various of carnivalesque celebrations. At the image's bottom, snapshots of youth in action – presumably the sorts of youth that would insist on interrupting the 'Youth and Student Campaign for *Bolivarian* Socialism.' These youth are indigenous, women, black, spray paint artists, and protestors (with a sign in English: 'Bush Must Go!'). These are not, that is, the idealized, passive, and above all Europeanized citizens of nineteenth century *Bolivarianismo*.

Fernando Coronil and Julie Skurski (2006) argue that the function of Bolívar fundamentally changed after the *caracazo* of 1989. Coronil and Skurski outline three ways in which Bolívar has been mythologized in Venezuelan history. In the first, Bolívar operates both as a military and civilizing force. In the second, Bolívar evokes the principle necessity of unity and the subordination of particular interests to the general good; a vaulted ideal often misused by twentieth century Venezuelan Presidents. Finally, Bolivarianismo as it developed in the twentieth century emphasized a direct link between the leader and the people. The *Bolivarianismo*

articulated in the poster for a youth campaign for Bolivarian socialism suggests a new, more multitudinous and rebellious iteration of Bolívar's function in Venezuela today.

As a leader in one side of the war that decimated much of what is now Venezuela and Colombia, Bolívar was certainly a figure associated with violence, yet he was also an enlightened patrician leader who was able to contain and direct the *Llaneros*. Put differently, Bolívar represented a “union between civilizing force and barbarous energy” (90), a synthesis of raw (American) physical prowess and refined (European) culture. This civilizational trope cannot be overemphasized in historical *Bolivarianismo*, as it corresponds directly with the socio-political function of progress-narratives and the discursive subaltern positioning of Venezuela in modern capitalist world system. This legacy makes contemporary renderings of Bolívar all the more noteworthy in that they run in the exact opposition direction of the fundamental racial and civilizational ground the Bolívar myth once relied upon.

For example, Chilean artist Juan Dávila created quite a stir in August 1994 when, in an installation project funded in part through Chile's Ministry of Education, he mailed postcards depicting Simón Bolívar as a crass mestiza transvestite to both officials and the general public.

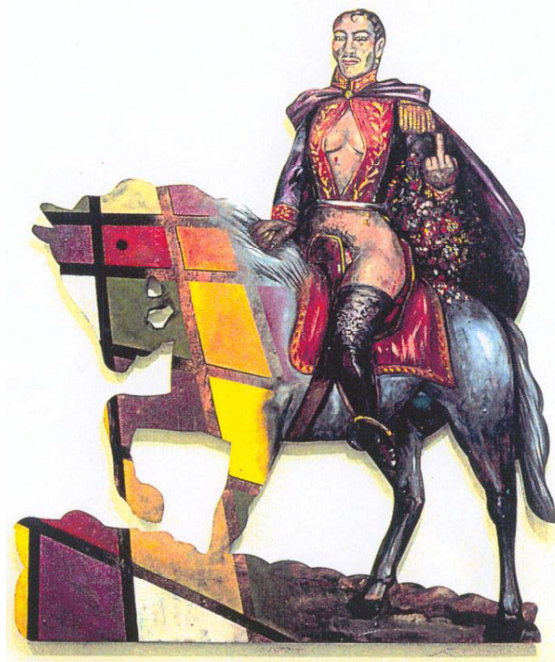


Figure 4.4 Juan Dávila *El Libertador Simón Bolívar* (taken from http://www.hemi.nyu.edu/por/publications/emisferica/5.2/52_images/52_lg_guerrero_04.jpg)

The Venezuelan embassy in Santiago lodged official complaints to the Chilean government, and the debate among the public quickly took a reactionary, ugly turn. Nelly Richard (2004) notes the president of the Chilean Senate argued, “works of art should respect the limit of ‘good taste and good manners’” (123). Other expressions cut right to the bone of the matter, decrying the “indecorous and criminal attacks on the immortal genius of the American independence.” The underlying logic to the public outcry to Dávila’s *Simón Bolívar*, argues Richard, centered on

the act of painting the Liberator ‘as if he were a deviant’ (with the body of a woman) and making a streetwise gesture, popular and obscene, with a direct sexual connotation (i.e., giving the finger). But there was also the racial mixing of his facial traits (*mestizaje*) that indicates the indigenous nature of the person. The indigenous, the feminine, and the popular exhibited the traits of subidentity so long censored by the academicism of universal art history in complicity with the interests of a whitewashing ideology of official Latin

Americanism: traits of impurity that contaminated the official image of the hero, of the independence legend of Latin America, integrating ‘the subordination (the Indian, the woman) to the criollo centrality (oligarchy, masculine) of the national project’ (124).

Bolívar as myth, as empty signifier, collided in 1994 against the substantive limit of a content judged intolerable by the Venezuelan and Chilean establishments’ racial, gender and class sensibilities.

Here the myth of Bolívar is just as significant for what it does not and cannot signify for a particular discursive universe as it is for what it directly enunciates. Bolívar as *el Libertador* had of course already been rewritten multiple times, and entire libraries have been dedicated to the interpretation, reinterpretation and judgment of Bolívar as republican, aristocrat, military thinker, political theorist, son of the Enlightenment and beyond. However, to depict Bolívar as such an *other* was too far for the Chilean political and artistic establishment and representatives of the Venezuelan government.¹²⁷ What is important in the Dávila controversy is the degree to which the mythical figure exposes a historical and material limit to the malleability of a particular myth. The civilizational content of the myth of Bolívar is thus exposed in this elite reaction to the postcard campaign – as it has been in, for example, the graffito “Bolívar no fue comunista!” – as one in which the nation’s founding requires the persistent core of rich white male heterosexual power.

Finally, the myth of Bolívar as the tragic destiny of the revolutionary. As is well known, Bolívar died destitute and on his way to exile from the very continent for

¹²⁷ I leave the question as to whether or not the general public was more or less inclined to share the reactions of cultural and political elites to Dávila’s project to the side for the present moment in that this is not really the heart of the matter.

which he had sacrificed so much. Though born into a rich *mantuano* family, Bolívar rejected the decadent life of the colonial elite, freed his family's slaves, and sold the majority of his inheritance to fund the wars of independence and to quietly care for the wounded and the widowed in its aftermath (Lynch 2006, 281). In a particularly dispirited correspondence to the president of Ecuador, General Juan José Flores, Bolívar summed up his life and his life's work as follows:

You know that I have ruled for twenty years, and from these I have derived only a few certainties: (1) America is ungovernable, for us; (2) Those who serve a revolution plow the sea; (3) The only thing one can do in America is to emigrate; (4) This country will fall inevitably into the hands of the unbridled masses and then pass almost imperceptibly into the hands of petty tyrants, of all colors and races; (5) Once we have been devoured by every crime and extinguished by utter ferocity, the Europeans will not even regard us as worth conquering; (6) If it were possible for any part of the world to revert to primitive chaos, it would be America in her final hour (quoted in Lynch 2006, 276).

This failed-Bolívar operates as something of a disappointed father in the mythological imaginary of the Americas and a cautionary example for would-be agents of social change. At the same time, and in a paradoxically reinforcing fashion, the Bolívar myth, “compensated for a national feeling of inferiority to the world, especially to Europe...he was the first Latin American of real universal dimension who enabled them to escape from the tendency of self-deprecation” (Lynch 2006, 303). As such, part and parcel of the historical unfolding of the Bolívar myth has included a pretension toward living the life of Bolívar, of avoiding his mistakes, and of reclaiming his glory on terms equal or greater to the omnipresent comparison to Europe and the United States.

All this changed with the series of social and political upheavals that began with the *caracazo* of February 1989. With this upheaval, the real death knell of the *puntofijo* system, conservative readings of Bolívar became decidedly less popular among the Venezuelan people.¹²⁸ However, the rewriting of Bolívar and of Bolivarianismo characterized by the billboard lording over 23 de Enero with which I began this section and which characterizes the ultimate trajectory of this change began much earlier. In the early 1980s, when (to name only a few key figures) Hugo Chávez, Douglas Bravo and Nelson Sánchez¹²⁹ founded a civico-military alliance against the Fourth Republic and the *puntofijo* system, they built it on a new iteration of Bolivarian political ideology. A mixture of Marxist-Leninism, Liberation Theology, and the political thought of Bolívar and other 19th century figures (especially Simón Rodríguez, radical pedagogue and republican; and Ezequiel Zamora, a peasant leader who rallied under the banner “Oligarcas Temblad!” – Tremble, Oligarchs!), Bolivarianismo emerged from the failed guerrilla wars of the 1960s and 1970s as an urban-based and tactically focused ideology (Chávez 2005; Garrido 2000; Gott 2008). The name chosen by the first military cell Chávez joined, the Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario-200 (Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement, MBR-200) reinforces its outlaw status through its name and synchronizes its birth with the birth

¹²⁸ For example, today a number of anti-chavista critics have extended their criticism of the Chávez government to a rejection of the “cult of Bolívar” and the ostensible militarism it entails {Citation}

¹²⁹ Bravo and Sánchez were both partisans in the ill-fated Venezuelan guevarista guerrilla struggles of the 1960-70s. Today, Bravo is something of a comradely critic of the Chávez government, advocating for a deepening of the revolutionary process. Sánchez, whom I had the privilege of interviewing in December of 2008, took up a position in the education and outreach arm of the state oil company, PDVSA.

of *el Libertador*, their oath of conspiracy taking place on the 200th anniversary of Bolívar's birth (Gott 2005).

An abrupt stop, by way of transitioning to a conclusion: What then does this all mean for *Bolivarianismo* today? More pages than I have available can be written on the fluctuations, détournements, subaltern reclamations, and conservative reactions of historical and contemporary *Bolivarianismo*. Rather than suggest that one ideological overwriting has succeeded in defining Bolívar, oil, or the state and progress over another, I would like to provisionally suggest that all of the myths touched upon in these three sections circulate at one and the same time, becoming monstrous. That is to say, if myths are central to the production and reproduction of the *habitus*, at present the *habitus* of Bolivarian Venezuela is one of radical possibility, ambivalence, and contingent articulation on a scale that has not been seen in generations.

Bolivarianismo, once an ideology of order and hierarchy, has become instead a *context* of flux, change, experimentation, and the potential for upheaval. Myth, in this sense, has escaped ideology.

V. Conclusions: The Myth and the Empty Signifier

This chapter contends that contemporary *Bolivarianismo* is a constellation of subject-producing myths and discourses, rather than a stable or coherent ideology. Bolívar, Oil, the State, Progress: these were not invented by Hugo Chávez, nor did the social movements that made him possible. In their present rearticulation, these discourses provide a sort of verification and valorization of revolutionary subjectivity and action. They fuel antagonism and posit a future where previously they organized

the social body into a cohesive, harmonious whole anchored by the spectacle of the past. Thus, against critical theories that posit something of a ‘real’ ground beyond ideological confusion to which the Marxist (or otherwise) Revolutionary must stride, we can see in these instances how myth has central in the production of meaning and a collectivity capable of carrying out social change.

However, given the malleability of these figures and their historically enduring nature, we must ask what differentiates them from the empty signifiers critiqued in the previous chapter? There, I developed a critique of the hegemony theory and populism of Ernesto Laclau, in part because of the way in which his semiotic inflection of ‘radical democracy’ lends itself to recapture by the liberal social contract. However, in this chapter I have described a situation in which myth and ideology become prone to multiple encodings. Is this tantamount to suggesting that, for example, ‘Bolívar is what we make of him,’ that the symbol and myth of Bolívar are a stitching point for oppositional publics? Or perhaps that the Bolivarian Revolution is rooted in a substantial sense of Venezuelan-ness, that the process is fundamentally national(ist) in scope, and that therefore range of potential social positions, inclusions, and exclusions are familiar and limited?

No. And, yes.

As I have also argued throughout this chapter, there is a fundamental class logic to the various manifestations of myth in Venezuela today. Furthermore, the relation of myth to the logic of the social has to do with the construction of the *habitus*, and that the habit, affect, and common senses that are generated in the *habitus* needn’t

always be the elements of conservatism we often assume them to be. Indeed, it is through the practices and habits – that is, through bodies acting in common with other bodies – that the multitude forms itself (Beasley Murray 2011). As they do so, they inevitably pick up, rewrite, and rearrange the narratives, discourses, and myths that make up the world by which they are create, and the world they seek.

Against this, the logic of the empty signifier (à la Laclau) entails a high degree of subjective and individual affective investment. Politics is possible because we operate ‘as if’ the leader actually represents ‘our’ interests. We submit to political authority – conservative or insurrectionary – because we believe in this correspondence and this social identity. The exchange is of course key, but impossible without translation; the empty signifier is the universally fungible ‘stuff’ that makes the affective transfer of loyalties possible.

While the myths I have discussed in this chapter retain a high degree of ambivalence – oil, for example feeds into both a tragic and a heroic disposition towards progress – in their current articulation they are all rooted in a fundamental social perspective and antagonism. They serve to stitch together competing blocs, each of which represents not only a particular class – that much is obvious – but also a particular way of organizing the social. The opposition, to the extent that it organizes itself successfully in mythical fashion seeks to rescue Venezuela from an uncertain, tumultuous, and potentially destructive future. The Bolivarian myth interjects itself into the context that I describe in the next chapter as ‘after neoliberalism’ and seeks to traverse these recent uncertain decades in the pursuit of a better, more equal and just,

world. In this sense then it would be possible to suggest that Venezuela today is ‘post-ideological’ in the sense often posited by the liberal-capitalist triumphalism of the post-Cold War era. Indeed, given the ‘Mariateguian’ manner in which myths deploy social forces in a futurally-oriented fashion, one might suggest that the Bolivarian Revolution’s contribution to the world situation has been the reawakening of politics, and the reinvigoration politics of ideology after the defeat of actually existing socialism and the on-going global crises of the neoliberal model. In order to make such a claim, however, it will first and finally be necessary to diagnose what, precisely, neoliberalism was (and is) in Venezuela, how the contemporary moment breaks with this situation, and what hope the Bolivarian Revolution has of consolidating and continuing this trajectory in and beyond the present.

It is to this task that I now turn.

Chapter 5

‘...after Neoliberalism’?

Descriptions of contemporary Venezuela highlighting the intensely political and polarized nature of the present have become rather common. In all likelihood, these observations say more about the worlds from which a given speaker hails than about the situation in the Bolivarian Republic. Impromptu street corner debates about foreign policy and constitutional referenda, multi-thousands strong marches, and a general air of transition and voluntarism are all strong medicine for observers from the supposedly ‘post-political’ global north where sex scandals and gaffs have taken the place of democratic participation and contention. Of course, the United States and Europe are now, finally (2011-2012), undergoing waves of contention and consternation against economic crisis and restructuring. Protestors of various political stripes have been taking to the streets to voice their indignation at a global economic and political order in which banks are considered ‘too big to fail’ while increasing numbers of people are subjected to ‘fiscal discipline.’¹³⁰

From the perspective of Venezuela, this is all uncanny, or rather, a bit familiar and a bit late. In many ways, Latin America was *the* laboratory in which neoliberalism

¹³⁰ Tellingly, the protests against unemployment and economic restructuring have been to this point (February, 2012) leaderless and amorphous. Movements that might be generally described as ‘anti-capitalist’ identify themselves either affectively or structurally. In Spain, anti-austerity protestors are simply ‘los indignados’ (the angry); In the English-speaking world, ‘the 99%.’ TeleSUR, the continental cable news network founded in 2005 by Venezuela, Bolivia, and Cuba, follows the protests in the United States rather closely under the banner ‘los indignados de los Estados Unidos.’

moved from idea to reality. Beginning with the Pinochet coup in Chile against the Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende in 1973, Latin American societies (with the exception, until 2011, of Cuba) have been reorganized according to the needs of the market and the capitalist world system. Wave after wave of structural adjustment and political reorganization took place throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The social toll in terms of increased inequality and diminished aspirations were so great that we now refer to this era, in which neoliberal ideas eventually dominated *all* facets of state power, as the ‘lost decades.’¹³¹ As I discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation, the response in Venezuela to the neoliberal restructuring program announced in 1989 was immediate and violent. Thousands took to the streets on February 27th of that year and thousands were killed by state security forces in what is now remembered as the *caracazo* (the explosion in Caracas). In its aftermath, protests against the government and neoliberal economics continued and grew in size, frequency, and intensity on a scale never before seen in modern Venezuela (López Maya 2005). Neoliberalism became firmly established as synonymous with poverty, inequality, and state repression in Venezuela and throughout much of the region.¹³²

¹³¹ Potentially even worse, James Petras (1997) contends that civil society also became permeated with neoliberal ‘common sense’ values of individualistic self-help and privatization during the NGO ‘boom’ of the same era. No aspect was safe from reorganization by free-market rationality

¹³² The extent to which this is the case can perhaps best be illustrated in the fact that by the time of this writing (February 2012), even the unified anti-*chavista* opposition candidate for president, Henrique Capriles Radonski, identifies himself as anti-neoliberal, left-of-center, and in favor of the Chávez government’s social programs. He also openly declares his admiration for former president of Brazil, Luiz Ignacio ‘Lula’ da Silva (Neuman 2012). Of course, this is nothing new. Even in the 1989 presidential campaign then-candidate Carlos Andrés Pérez described the

Today, the Chávez government defines itself as anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist and a growing body of analytical and theoretical literature agrees that even if Venezuela has yet to settle into its promised ‘socialism for the twenty first century,’ it and much of the region have at a minimum entered a ‘post-neoliberal’ phase (see for example Barra 2009; Beasley-Murray, Cameron, and Hershberg 2010; Hershberg and Rosen 2007; Leiva 2008; Pradilla Cobos 2009).

Despite (or perhaps because of) the *sturm und drang* of political mobilization, however, at the level of *economy* and *society* the Venezuelan scene remains one of crushing poverty, inequality, and the needless loss of lives and futures. This of course has also become something of common observation of contemporary Venezuela. This chapter seeks to understand what ‘post-neoliberalism’ can mean in Venezuela today, in large part by asking what neoliberalism *was*. I contend that Neoliberalism goes beyond neoclassical economics, the power of transnational lending institutions, the financialization of the Capitalist World System, or the rhetorical styles of its most prominent advocates and enemies. I examine it instead as a social engineering apparatus *within* the intersecting historical, political, cultural, and economic structures of the modern liberal tradition. That is to say, Neoliberalism was a *habitus* (Bourdieu 1999; Giroux 2005). Neoliberalism formed a lifeworld of subjects and possibilities. It attempted to order all of social and political life under the control of the market.

Everything became a commodity – even up to and including resistance to

International Monetary Fund and its economic policies as ‘la bomba sola mata gente’ (a bomb that can only kill people). Pérez went on to announce one of the region’s most orthodox and draconian of structural adjustment programs mere days after taking the oath of office.

commodification itself.¹³³ Understood within this framework, the advances made by the Bolivarian Revolution are important not only because of the extent to which they reverse the privatizations, cuts in services, and deregulations of previous eras and administrations – though these achievements should not be undervalued. Rather, they are of greater significance to the extent that they form a new *habitus* outside of both neoliberalism as well as the liberal order of which it was an extension. On these grounds we can then adjudge the Bolivarian experiment’s sustainability and the extent to which it may be as ‘exportable’ as the structural adjustment that has been developed in Latin America over the last three decades and which is now again ‘coming to roost’ in the United States and Europe.¹³⁴

The chapter proceeds in four sections. In the first I outline the present ‘pink tide’ as a reaction to neoliberal restructuring in Latin America. I then step back historically, asking what neoliberalism was in Venezuela and Latin America. Here I examine neoliberalism’s economics and politics in terms of the subjects and lifeworlds they produced. I then critically examine characterizations of neoliberalism as somehow bringing about or resulting from post-democratic and post-political states of affairs. I then conclude with a consideration of what the end of neoliberalism as the end of politics might mean for the future of the Bolivarian Revolution, democracy, and the relation between constituent and constituted power.

¹³³ Hardt and Negri (2000) describe the process of the ‘real subsumption of labor under capital,’ a situation in which there is no longer any outside to the logic of the market.

¹³⁴ It is important to note that after its initial development in Pinochet’s Chile, structural adjustment did come to the Global North in the form of the Volcker Shock and other attempts to impose fiscal discipline, albeit in a piecemeal fashion.

I. Setting the Stage: 'The Pink Tide' and the Fourth Republic

Latin America was the laboratory in which neoliberalism was incubated and experimented with, and from which it was exported to the rest of the world. In 1976, three years after a bloody coup and after three years of failed economic planning by the military junta, General Augusto Pinochet of Chile summoned a group of economists trained by Milton Friedman to redesign the Chilean economy from scratch. The so-called 'Chicago Boys' transformed the nation's economy with the full backing of the military to ensure minimal resistance from those sectors most impacted by shock therapy and structural adjustment (Valdés 2008). Latin America was also the site of intense street battles throughout the 'lost decades' of the 1980s and 1990s pitting the poor against structural adjustment (Harnecker 2005, 2006).¹³⁵ In 1990, Latin America was also the first in developing a "kinder and gentler" and more managed form of neoliberalism. 'Neostructuralism,' a paradigm introduced by the United Nations' Economic Council on Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), was presented as a paradigm capable of mitigating the negative social consequences of neoliberalism while prioritizing national and regional economic growth under the

¹³⁵ In addition to the *caracazo* in Venezuela, there were protests against financial deregulation, privatization, and austerity throughout the region and the world. Some of these took the form of guerrilla campaigns (such as the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas, Mexico [1994-present]) while others toppled governments and saw worker occupations (in Argentina [1999-2002]), and still others saw entire cities mobilize against local governments, the police, and transnational business (as with the 'water wars' and 'gas wars' in Bolivia [2000 & 2005, respectively]). The results of these revolts – of which the Venezuela, Mexican, Argentine, and Bolivian events are but representative examples – have been mixed, and the election of left-of-center governments throughout the region has not necessarily resulted in a definitive break with policy nor the demobilization of social movements (Dangl 2010).

rules of capitalist globalization (Leiva 2008).¹³⁶ Finally, the region was first to mount a sustained and institutionalized outright rejection of neoliberalism, starting with the election of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 1998. This ‘pink decade’ of 1998-2009 might now be showing signs of losing momentum: a coup in Honduras in 2009; rightwing reversals in Chile, Panama, Guatemala, and Costa Rica; Chávez’s recent fight with cancer; and the deepening global financial crisis all suggest that the room for the regional left to deepen the pace and scope of reforms has shrunk. As of late 2011, *both* neoliberalism and its most credible challenge seem to be in the midst of deepening crises (Sader 2011).¹³⁷

What then, of the ‘pink tide’ or the ‘left turn’? Recent analyses of Latin American political economy have settled around the notion that a ‘pink tide’ of left-of-center governments has engulfed the region in the first years of the twenty first century. With the exception of Colombia – recipient of the third largest amount of

¹³⁶ Ironically, ECLAC had previously been most identified with its contributions to mid-twentieth century Dependency theory and Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI). However, rather than breaking from what ECLAC itself describes as the “savage capitalism” of neoliberalism, neostructuralism reinforces the export-orientation of Latin American economies proscribed by neoliberal doctrine, a position it has not revised since the 1990 publication of its report *Changing Production Patterns with Social Equity* (xvii).

¹³⁷ As always, there are countertrends. At the time of this writing (February, 2012), the Eurozone’s very future is in question as France and Germany attempt to impose austerity measures on Greece, Spain, and Italy. Yet, the first successful summit of the Comunidad Económica de Latin América y el Caribe (CELAC) – a body designed to replace the Organization of American States and which explicitly excludes the United States from membership – has just concluded. While it is beyond the scope of the present chapter to delve into deeper analysis of CELAC and its position in the current conjuncture, it nonetheless seems safe to suggest that *even if* contemporary regional left turns are not destined to result in a definitive break with global capital it is also necessary to insist that that the future is no less destined to bring an unequivocal return to the past.

United States military aid in the world – and more recently, Chile, election after election on the South American continent has seen victory for the presidential candidate of the left. However, as no shortage of commentators have noted, there is little in the way of consistency among these administrations (the ‘pink’ thus registering a dilution of socialism’s deeper red). Within this narrative, Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution enjoys a doubly exceptional status in that it was the first country to elect a leftist to the presidency (in 1998), and that the rhetoric and policies of the Chávez government in the years since have consistently occupied the most rigorously ‘left’ – domestically socialist, internationally anti-imperialist, regionally integrationist – position on the Latin American political spectrum.

Three subsidiary theses on the ‘pink tide’ relate directly to Venezuela are of key concern to this chapter, and are necessary for understanding the stakes and trajectories of the present. The first contends that – with the exception of temporarily curbing astronomical inflation rates – the so-called ‘Washington Consensus’ failed to better or even match the record of human and economic development of the Import Substituting Industrialization model it claimed to ‘correct’ (Grugel and Riggirozzi 2009; Moreno-Brid and Paunovic 2010). The pink tide, then, is considered here a response to, result of, or remedy for ‘lost decades.’ Public support for the return of an interventionist state-form and the rhetoric of socialism would thus not be possible were it not for the human catastrophe of previous administrations’ free-market fundamentalism (Beasley-Murray, Cameron, and Hershberg 2010).

The second thesis contends that the radical nature of the Bolivarian Revolution is a privilege afforded by Venezuela's exceptional oil wealth. This thesis can serve either as an apology for the relatively slower pace and more limited scope of reforms in Chile and Brazil – they don't have the glut of oil – or as a means of warning away would-be revolutionaries in poorer countries – 'revolution' might from this perspective be seen as a privilege of the rich. Furthermore, the Bolivarian Revolution's ability to rapidly raise the standard of living for Venezuelans can be seen as the result of a boom in oil prices, particularly in 2003-2008, rather than as a result of actual social transformation. At a minimum, oil is seen to have given the Chávez administration political room for maneuver not afforded to other governments in the region, thus rendering the Venezuelan example unexportable (see, for example, Castañeda 2006; Shifter 2006). The political opportunities afforded by Venezuela's financial largesse were further augmented by the completion with which Venezuela's liberal democratic *ancien régime* collapsed. Thus, while all pink tide governments captured office due to widespread popular discontent with economic elites and the political class associated with neoliberalism, in Venezuela the sentiment was much more robust, and the successors had a toolbox enhanced by revenues from a global commodity boom.

A third thesis on Venezuela follows from the second, holding that the pink tide can be divided into 'social democratic' and 'radical populist' currents. The contours of this argument more or less follow the line established by former Mexican Foreign Minister Jorge Castañeda (2006), who argues that the region's twenty first century left

is comprised of two camps. The “good left,” he argued, is fiscally responsible, open to global trade, friendly with the United States, and aspires to bring Northern European style Social Democracy to South America. The “bad left” for Castañeda is irresponsibly demagogic, proto-authoritarian, and economically suicidal. Of the two, Castañeda contends Brazil’s Lula and Chile’s Bachelet best represent the good left as former radicals now converted to fiscal responsibility and representative liberal democracy. Of the latter, ‘populist’ camp, he considers Venezuela’s Chávez a “Perón with oil” rather than a social revolutionary of the Castroist stripe (38).¹³⁸

There is of course more to the third line of analysis’s attempt to differentiate among pink tide states than the concerns of a friend of Washington. For example, Juan Carlos Moreno-Brid and Igor Paunovic (2010) note that post-neoliberal development schemes have differed between the Andean region and the Southern Cone. Brazil under Lula’s Workers’ Party, Chile under the Concertación governments of Lagos and Bachelet,¹³⁹ and Uruguay under the Frente Amplio of

¹³⁸ Despite his distaste for vociferous radicals and self-proclaimed revolutionaries, however, Castañeda admits “the reasons for Latin America’s turn to the left are not hard to discern,” (29) having to do with the loss of any (no matter how flimsy) moral or geopolitical justification for US intervention or design in the region after the Cold War (29); persistent, obvious, and massive social inequality (30); and the transition to democracy after a decade of military and authoritarian rule (30).

¹³⁹ The pattern in Chile is more complicated than is suggested by this characterization. Unlike other regional governments, Chile’s shift to neoliberalism occurred under military dictatorship rather than in the course of a transition to democracy, as was the case in Argentina and Brazil. Also, the Concertación coalition – including Christian Democrats and the Socialist Party – has by and large maintained the economic policies (in Chile, ‘el modelo’) established by Pinochet. Finally, whereas the electorates of Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay have all opted for ‘staying the course’ with the elections of Rousseff, Fernández de Kirchner, and

Tabaré Vázquez and now Pepe Mujica have all worked to forge public-private partnerships and augment their pre-established and relatively diversified local industrial and agricultural bases. In Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador, on the other hand, post-neoliberal macroeconomic policy has by and large only managed to reconfigure and redirect the distribution patterns of already established rent-extraction regimes based on primary-product export. For this reason, a number of commentators of various political persuasions have characterized Andean ‘left turns’ as radical-populists that take mid-twentieth century figures like Juan Domingo Perón as their guide while Southern Cone social democratic and developmentalist regimes pursue the model of the (now disappearing) European welfare state (see, for example Cameron and Sharpe 2010; Sader 2011; Weyland, Madrid, and Hunter 2010).

Key to all of these analyses is the assertion that neoliberalism is somehow over, and while allowing for variation among cases, contemporary economic and social policy in Latin America is crafted under the shadow of its neoliberal past. Rarely, however, do they attempt to account for the lived experience of neoliberalism and post neoliberalism. They thus misdiagnose the place of politics, focusing on elections and policies rather than the formation and mobilization of collective bodies. These analyses, in short, are too late. Change at the institutional level is the *result* of social transformations, not their source. At best, as I argued in Chapter One of this dissertation, constituted power can only hope to aid and amplify constituent power. At worst, it loses sight of power’s origins, becoming ‘fetishized’ in the language of

Mujica respectively, in 2010 right wing multimillionaire Sebastián Piñera was elected in Chile, calling for a return to market orthodoxy.

Enrique Dussel. In Jon Beasley-Murray's (2010) estimation, "All this talk of left turns and what comes next ignores the fact that the electoral successes are themselves the result of prior changes; the status quo has *already* shifted. The self-styled left is less the agent of change than its beneficiary" (127). That is to say, the *habitus* had already been altered, the constitution of forces had shifted, and an opening was *created* for Chávez (and Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and the Kirchners in Argentina) by the affects and habits of the times.

In Venezuela, I was often struck at the intensely *tangible* nature of these affects. *Habitus* is not only an immaterial or ideational 'structuring-structure.' It constructs the physical surroundings and places, directs, and divides bodies and buildings as well.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Writing about neoliberalism and urbanization, Emilio Pradilla Cobos (2009) notes that historically, the particular mode of capitalist development has both quantitatively and qualitatively determined urbanization in Latin America. More generally, Henri Lefebvre (1992) contends that social relations are not only the basis for asymmetrical power in the mode of production, but in the formation of the quotidian as well. Space, that is to say, is not a natural background, but a construction that flows and adapts reflexively with the bodies that inhabit and are engendered by it. Pradilla Cobos illustrates how capital flows under conditions of neoliberalism produce or exacerbate preexisting urban-periphery geographies in Latin America. Alejandro Portes and Kelly Hoffman (2003) in many ways take up a similar position, arguing against the 'marginality' or 'surplus population' theses in sociology that contends contemporary modes of production relegate increasingly large segments of society to the 'fringes' where they are superfluous to the needs of political legitimation and capital accumulation. This fringe, characterized by the informal sector of flexible, usually precarious, labor power is under the marginality thesis has become excessive to these needs to such an extent that they no longer even qualify for the status of *lumpenproletariat*; they have shifted from a 'relative surplus population' of the unemployed to a 'permanent surplus population' that will never be employed (for an example of this argument, see Davis 2006). Portes and Hoffman, as well Aníbal Quijano (1983) and others, argue instead that marginalization flexibilization are not only key *consequences* of neoliberalism in Latin America, but are a perennial feature of the combined and uneven development of capital on a global scale.

Habit and affect are determined by the physical surroundings, reflecting a particular ideological and political position or identity.

Case in point: the main road connecting the coast to the capital was closed in 2006 when heavy rains triggered the near-collapse of a valley-spanning bridge. After a number of attempts to repair the old bridge – built during the dictatorship Marcos Pérez Jiménez in the 1950s – the Chávez government decided instead to construct an entirely new one. As a result, more than 200 families settled in a slum below the old bridge had to be resettled, and traffic between the capital and the coastally situated international airport was rerouted through mountainside shanties and single-lane roads. What was once a forty-five minute commute was transformed into a three-hour ordeal. At one point, the government positioned National Guard troops to assure the safety of drivers and passengers forced to travel through some of Venezuela’s roughest slums (Ellsworth 2008; Wilpert 2006). The replacement bridge was still under construction when I first moved to Venezuela in early 2007.

From the elevated vantage of the ad hoc route through the slums, one could judge the full scope of the rebuild project, which at that time was being accelerated in anticipation of the Copa América soccer tournament Venezuela hosted later that year. I was in a car at that time with an old friend from the US and with Vincent, a self-professed ‘*taxista bolivariana*,’ or ‘Bolivarian Taxi Driver.’¹⁴¹ When asked what exactly made him a *taxista bolivariana* as opposed to any other particular sort of taxi driver, he replied matter of factly that he drove a taxi and supported President

¹⁴¹ Vincent is not his real name.

Chávez. Midway through the drive back to Caracas he also explained that the *taxista* collective he helped found organized like-minded drivers and had recently appealed to the Mayor of the city for funds to refurbish their small fleet of Toyotas. The Mayor at the time, Juan Barreto, obliged, and as a result this tour of the barrios and the bridge rebuild occurred in a red sedan festooned with the most recent official slogans of the Bolivarian Revolution.¹⁴²

Looking down on the construction project from a point where Vincent stopped the taxi, we saw two parallel lines cutting across the valley at workers and heavy equipment surfacing the new viaduct. Vincent spat and shook his head. He expressed mixed emotions about the project. He was annoyed at the hassle of the convoluted and occasionally unsafe trips the rebuild forced him to make multiple times a day. However, he also admitted a degree of resigned or opportunistic contentment – routes on roads that were inaccessible by bus had been good for business. Finally, Vincent was proud. Sternly, he informed us that the government closed the bridge *before* catastrophe struck. In the past, ‘*en la cuarta república*’ (the fourth republic), “someone would have had to die for anything to happen.”

¹⁴² As a result, Vincent and his cohort were officially recognized and licensed drivers. In Venezuela as in many other parts of Latin America, public (as in busses and subways) and semi-private (as in cabs and ‘combis’ – essentially taxis or taxi-trucks that transport numbers of unrelated passengers into the barrios or between towns where public transport will not or cannot travel) transportation is usually the purview of the informal sector. With little in the way of regulation these informal sector transports were often accused by other passengers I encountered of being part of kidnapping rings, or more frequently, of gouging commuters with fares that varied with the flow of traffic. Vincent also repeated this truism (while handing me his business card and telling me to call him whenever I needed a ride to the airport), assuring me that I could trust him.

As we hair-pinned our way to the center of the capital, Vincent pointed to the shanties one expects when visiting poor parts of the world: the dingy but vibrant mix of colors, tin-roofed houses, ad hoc organization, and chaos everywhere to the eyes of the nonresident; the inevitable shirtless children running dangerously close to traffic; mud and refuse. He proclaimed, as we passed a shanty (*ranchito* in the Venezuelan argot) with a collapsed tin roof, without the hesitation, guilt, or qualification one might expect in such a situation “arquitectura de la cuarta república” (fourth-republic architecture).

This phrase, *la cuarta república*, came up often during my time in Venezuela. With the rewriting of the constitution in 1999 the country had entered its fifth republic. The party Chávez and his supporters stitched together for that first campaign for the presidency in 1998 was named the ‘Fifth Republic Movement’ – Movimiento de la Quinta República (the logo is MVR, preferring the Roman numeralization of the ‘fifth’ since ‘v’ and ‘b’ are pronounced the same in Spanish, and the ‘b’ references Bolívar, the independence war hero revered by *chavistas* and opposition supporters alike). The MVR campaign revolved around the promise to rewrite the constitution. Every institution in the state apparatus was reorganized. An amendment to the constitution prohibited the privatization of Venezuela’s oil and other key sectors – steps toward which had been taken during the *apertura* (opening) of the previous decades. The very name of the country was changed – from the Republic of Venezuela to the *Bolivarian* Republic of Venezuela. So-called megaelections were held in 2000 after the ratification of the new constitution in which

every office in the country was contested. In this context of a new start and a blank slate, supporters of the government contend that to be *de la cuarta república* is to be an unwanted holdover from an unjust past.

That is to say, since Chávez's election 'la cuarta república' has become more than a chronological or historical referent. It signifies a set of subjects and values – the self-interest of a conniving cabbie or the corruption of elected officials – just as much as a physical world of crumbling infrastructure and inequality. When our *taxista*-turned-guide pointed to a particularly humble *ranchito*, or cursed the crumbling infrastructure and labyrinthine, anarchic roads that took us through the mountains, they were inevitably described as *de la cuarta república*. He followed Chávez in this regard. The President also often draws distinguishing and related lines across the institutional history of Venezuela, economic policy, and ideology by using the language of republics. *La cuarta república* is thus linked with poverty and neoliberalism and subjects defined by it are considered to be the beneficiaries of inequality. To describe someone or something as *de la cuarta república* is thus to also identify oneself with the opposing project and to embrace a series of progressive negations: socialism against neoliberalism, the public against the private, equality against inequality, inclusion and participation versus exclusion and representation. If *la cuarta república* has become linked with neoliberalism, so too has it been identified with a particular subjectivity, one that persists to this day in the form of an enemy to the Bolivarian Revolution.

In a late 2011 appraisal of Misión Vivienda Venezuela, for example, Chávez articulated this position very clearly. Misión Vivienda Venezuela is a program aimed at moving poor Venezuelans from life in the *ranchitos* to permanent residencies. It was initiated in mid 2011 – at which time Chávez emphasized, “the housing problem cannot be solved from within the capitalist system – here we are going to solve it with socialism and more socialism” (quoted in Boothroyd 2011). By November the program had achieved ninety-five percent of its first year goal. Disaggregating, Chávez announced that of the 84,517 dwellings constructed, sixty-five percent were paid for by the public sector, thirty-five by the private sector, with forty-seven percent of the labor coming from ‘popular power’ – community organizations, volunteer brigades, and labor unions, mostly. At the event, Chávez declared, “we will not tire for a second in fulfilling the great commitment we have to our people. Satisfaction of the vital needs of all of the people: this is the supreme goal of Socialism.” The official government press release concludes, again citing Chávez, “the president assured that Misión Vivienda homes are to be both dignified and well-provisioned, ‘these aren’t the hovels delivered in the fourth republic,’ [he said]” (Prensa de la Ministerio del Poder Popular para Vivienda y Hábitat 2011).¹⁴³

¹⁴³ "No desmayemos ni un segundo en este gran compromiso que tenemos con nuestro pueblo. Satisfacción de las necesidades vitales de todo el pueblo. Esa es la meta suprema del socialismo", puntualizó Chávez. El primer Mandatario Nacional, aseguró que las viviendas que se entregan a través de la Gran Misión Vivienda son dignas y están bien equipadas, “no son los cuartuchos que entregaban en la cuarta república.”

This sort of discursive chain from the President is by no means rare. In his open-ended (and often hours long) addresses to the nation, in frequent spontaneous calls to news programs, in regularly scheduled speeches announcing this or that public works program, Chávez regularly equates inequality and deprivation with capitalism, neoliberalism, and the fourth republic. Indeed, the concepts are presented as synonyms in most speeches, with the ‘socialism’ of his government proffered as the cure to past ills. There is little in the historical record to contradict his diagnosis; neoliberalism deepened social inequality in Venezuela, social precarity and the informal sector grew, and the ‘inefficient’ and corrupt government further entrenched itself in nearly all aspects of the economy (Edgardo Lander and Fierro 1996). However, few serious commentators would be so bold as to claim Venezuela can no longer be characterized in much the same terms: gaps in social services, violence and insecurity, the need to develop infrastructure, and corruption at most levels of government persist and undermine the credibility of the Chávez government, even among members of its core constituency.

Of course and as I have argued throughout this dissertation, the Bolivarian Revolution is a process rather than a single event or a definitive break with the past. As such, it should come as no surprise that elements of the Fourth Republic persist into the present. More often than not *both* sympathizers and detractors of the Bolivarian movement share, for better or worse, Benjamin Arditti’s (2007) characterization of the Venezuelan situation (and that of other contemporary left of center regimes in the region) as situated somewhere on the ‘edges’ of post Cold War

hegemonic liberalism. That is to say, the Venezuelan experiment has not done away with the profit motive, with political representative politics, or with the rights-based organization of state and society. If anything, it has added elements to this framework – recognizing collective forms of property, cultural citizenship, and moving toward a more participatory form of democracy, for example – but it has by no means done away with core values and subjectivities of modern liberal political systems. Despite the name and the pretense, what is occurring in Venezuela today is better characterized – at the level of institutions – as a democratic rather than revolutionary process. As such, the break with the past cannot be as total or broad ranging as some would like.

The contemporary conjuncture might thus be better described as something of an interstice. Assuming that ‘what comes next’ will be recognizable as a distinct epoch or era (and this is by no means an uncontroversial assumption)¹⁴⁴, for now there is little to define it save *what it is not*. We have yet to pass from negation to affirmation; the situation is one of innovation in the direction of an unclear future. However, to interstice, contingency, and innovation must also be added *anticipation* if one is to accurately characterize Venezuela in particular and the ‘pink tide’ more generally. In the same way that I described myth as a projection in the previous chapter, so too here must locating oneself in the fifth republic be understood as anticipating a new organization of (collective) being. Whereas the past is associated

¹⁴⁴ Paraphrasing Alain Badiou’s (2007) challenge in *The Century*, it seems to be somewhat impossible for something like an era to ‘think itself’ in its own terms. Such gestures seem ever to shuttle between the retroactive and the anticipatory. Rarely if ever is an immanent apprehension of the moment possible.

with privation and the circumscription of ‘the political’ to complex financial management or street-level resistance (what I describe later in more detail as ‘postpolitics’), the present is posited at the subjective level of the *chavista* rank and file as a more increasingly inclusive, participatory, and humane process. It is in other words a better, but still shifting, terrain of struggle and change.

II. A Requiem for Neoliberalism?

Neoliberalism and the structural adjustment associated with it did not arrive at the same time, nor was it uniformly implemented, throughout the Latin America. The signal crisis arrived after the combination of global slump in commodity prices and the rise of interest rates made the external debts of regional economies unmanageable. In 1982 Mexico was the first to declare a moratorium on servicing its foreign debt, with the result that “the entire continent, in the eyes of developed country leaders, became uncreditworthy” (Hershberg and Rosen 2006, 6). In order to bring the region into an emerging global political and economic regime known since as the Washington Consensus and to make states solvent in the eyes of creditors and developed-economy states, a heavy dose fiscal discipline was proscribed that disproportionately negatively impacted the region’s poorest citizens (7). The Import-Substituting Industrialization model – whereby states used a variety of means to protect local industries from foreign capital – was deemed to have corroded the productivity, solvency, and moral fiber of the region. The strong medicine of ‘shock therapy’ and structural adjustment was therefore first and foremost targeted at replacing ‘inefficient’ state planning and intervention with the ostensibly more

natural, harmonious, and efficient machinations of the market's invisible hand (Bourdieu 1999).

Latin America was forced to follow the rest of the globe in accepting Margaret Thatcher's dictum that there could be no alternative to neoliberalism. Under the banner of "unavoidable restructuring" a growing chorus of experts, opinion makers, and aspiring politicians throughout the region (many of whom were trained in the universities of the United States, United Kingdom, and France) contended that tough measures would have to be taken in order to right the wrongs of previous administrations' irresponsibility. Failure to do so would further retard the region's pursuit of modernity. While exact policies would be suited to each particular case, by the late 1980s something a consensus had emerged among local and hemispheric economists on the shape and scope of needed political and economic reforms. This 'Washington Consensus' – a phrase coined by John Williamson (2004) for the Institute for International Economics in 1989 – consisted of ten policy prerogatives aimed at correcting past mistakes and making Latin America safe for investment and development.

Looking Back: Policy Prerogatives of The Washington Consensus after Fifteen Years	
1. Fiscal Discipline	Aimed in particular at reducing sovereign deficits and at correcting balance of payments crises and high inflation. This was principle was sold as a move to rescue the poor in particular, as the rich could move their savings abroad (Williamson 2004).
2. Reordering Public Expenditure Priorities	Williamson (2004) contends “This suggested switching expenditure in a progrowth and propoor way, from things like nonmerit subsidies to basic health and education and infrastructure. It did <i>not</i> call for all the burden of achieving fiscal discipline to be placed on expenditure cuts; on the contrary, the intention was to be strictly neutral about the desirable size of the public sector” (3). In practice, however, this principle almost universally resulted in the gutting of social welfare programs, the impacts of which were disproportionately felt by the poorest (Giroux 2005).
3. Tax Reform	Like the previous principle, the goal of tax reform was conceivably admirable, given the region’s long-standing failure to create viable taxation systems and public-sourced state revenues. However, given the other elements of the Consensus, the principle to combine a broad tax base with moderate marginal tax rates often resulted in regressive taxes – like the sales tax – being levied against citizens while the biggest and often international businesses were able to write their own loopholes into the tax codes (Margheritis and Pereira 2007).
4. Liberalizing Interest Rates	As a step towards greater financial liberalization, this principle called for interest rates to be established by the market rather than by state authorities.
5. Competitive Exchange Rate	In order to facilitate foreign exchange, governments were called to cease manipulating exchange rates in order to protect domestic industry. In Argentina this policy lead to tying the peso to the dollar, which is widely held to be one of the key factors in that country’s political and economic meltdowns of the early twenty-first century (Bonnet 2006).

6. Trade Liberalization	Perhaps the most widely recognized element of the Consensus, so-called ‘free trade’ measures called for the reduction of tariffs and other barriers to international trade.
7. Liberalization of Inward Foreign Direct Investment	Opened domestic markets to foreign investment, usually allowing for minimal fees paid for the repatriation of capital by international firms.
8. Privatization	Williamson (2004) contends that this “originated as a neoliberal idea [that] had won broad acceptance.” Though he admits “[privatization] can be a highly corrupt process that transfers assets to a privileged elite for a fraction of their true value,” he insists the net effect of privatization has been beneficial to populations, particularly in terms of services rendered, most evidence points toward widespread rejection and even insurrection in the face of privatization’s deleterious effects (4). Perhaps the most striking example of this was in Bolivia, where revolts against the privatization of water, and then gas, in 2000 and 2004 respectively were key in building the movement around Evo Morales’s election in 2006 (Olivera and Lewis 2008).
9. Deregulation	Williamson (2004) defends deregulation by alleging, “this focused specifically on easing barriers to entry and exit, not on abolishing regulations designed for safety or environmental reasons, or to govern prices in a non-competitive industry” (4). The evidence on the ground, however, points toward widespread abuses of labor and environmental standards in, for example, Colombia where trade unionists have systematically been targeted for assassination (Gill 2005) and Ecuador, where Chevron and other petroleum companies were given a virtual <i>carte blanche</i> in the rain forests (Himley 2008).
10. Property Rights	Williamson claims the goal of this provision was to establish property right for citizens and entrepreneurs in the growing precarious and informal sectors, following Hernando de Soto’s (1989)9) model in <i>The Other Path</i> . However, Harvey (2007)7) and numerous others have noted that the emphasis on property rights in the Washington Consensus and orthodox neoliberalism more often leant itself to the deployment of the state’s repressive forces to protect the interests of capital – Bolivia’s water and gas wars again offering the starkest but by no means exclusive examples.

Figure 5.1 Adapted from Williamson (2004), with commentary.

On the unfolding of the Consensus in international development circles in

Washington and beyond, Hershberg and Rosen (2006) note:

no serious observer denied that the costs of transformation would be painful, or that there would be losers as well as winners...inefficient industries would be forced to shut down, competition from abroad would squeeze local producers, and beneficiaries of state largesse would lose long-standing privileges. What was not always acknowledged, however, was that the reforms would, at least in the short run, redistribute income upward, squeeze the living standards of those who could least afford it, and shred whatever was left of the social compact between the people and their rulers (8).

The ‘bitter pill’ of austerity was sold as the medicine national economies required to put Latin American economies back on track to development and modernization (Weyland 1998). In the offing these reforms failed to make good on promises to usher in a new era of prosperity and access to the most privileged tiers of the capitalist world system. Instead, the 1980s and 1990s were characterized by the steady shrinking of public goods, services, and protected standards of social well-being, with the result that today even the World Bank recognizes the need to ‘manage’ and embed liberal market policies with some modicum of social safety net provisions (Hershberg and Rosen 2006, 12).

That neoliberal structural adjustment would result in a net redistribution of wealth and power *upwards* while leaving precarity, labor power disciplined by the state’s repressive apparatuses, and the hegemony of usually foreign finance capital in its wake was all too predictable, given its first Latin American expression during the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet in Chile. Under the guidance of the ‘Chicago Boys’ the economic model established under military rule would prove

malleable enough to not only outlast the dictatorship, but to also be implemented throughout the region during the ‘democratic transitions’ of the late 1980s (Harvey 2007, 8).¹⁴⁵ Still referred to simply as ‘el modelo’ in Chile, and

working alongside the IMF, [the Chicago Boys] restructured the economy according to their theories. They reversed the nationalizations and privatized public assets, opened up natural resources (fisheries, timber, etc.) to private and unregulated exploitation (in many cases riding roughshod over the claims of indigenous inhabitants), privatized social security, and facilitated foreign direct investment and freer trade. The right of foreign companies to repatriate profits from their Chilean operations was guaranteed. Export-led growth was favored over import substitution. The only sector reserved for the state was the key resource of copper...this proved crucial to the budgetary viability of the state since copper revenues flowed exclusively into its coffers. (8)

By 1976, then, Chile had established the pattern upon which structural adjustment and ‘shock therapy’ would be based throughout the continent in the coming decades (even if it was less than politically expedient for elected officials to admit as much publicly) and even if it came about after defaulting on loans rather than in the wake of bloody coups. Furthermore, in addition to the actual policies of ‘el modelo,’ the *form* and *process* of structural adjustment and the ‘post-political’ nature of neoliberalism were also established in the context of the dictatorship. As appointed technocrats the ‘Chicago Boys’ had even less democratic legitimacy than Pinochet (they were never subjected to even the staged elections of the *generalissimo*), and to this day, challenges to the economic model they put in place are responded to with tear gas and rubber-coated bullets.

¹⁴⁵ This was a long-prepared for economic intervention. As Harvey (2007) also notes, “The US had funded training of Chilean economists at the University of Chicago since the 1950s as part of a Cold War program to counteract left wing tendencies in Latin America.” Pinochet turned to these fiscal libertarians after consolidating his control over the military junta and forcing out his Keynesian rivals (8).

In Venezuela as in Chile the neoliberal reforming governments initially retained control of its primary export commodity (oil in Venezuela, copper in Chile). The implementation of neoliberalism in each country was first and foremost primarily targeted at subsidies and state-owned industries deemed wasteful or redundant to the needs of a globally integrated national economy. In other words, structural adjustment in Venezuela sought to reverse the economic diversification sought for by the Import-Substituting Industrialization model but did not wholly or completely extract the state from the economy, further tying its livelihood to the logic of rent capture. The *apertura* of the oil economy came soon after, at first tentatively in the later stages of the Carlos Andrés Pérez presidency (1989-1993) and then more fully under Rafael Caldera (1994-1999) (Mommer 2003, 137).

Chile's *apertura*, on the other hand, took place under the watch of the ostensibly left-of center *Concertación* coalition and mostly *after* the region's emergence from the 'lost decades.' Ximena de la Barra and Richard Dello Buono (2009) note, "by the end of the [Ricardo] Lagos government (2000-2006), 70 percent of the copper industry was in the hands of transnational corporations, with the rest in imminent danger of following suit" (104). What is more, "between 1990 and 2005, continuous rule by the *Concertación* government resulted in doubling the income gap between the richest 5 percent and poorest 5 percent of the population (from 110 to 220 times as great). Capital became further concentrated into the hands of 1 percent of the population with two-thirds of the national territory now resting in private hands" (105). In other words, while neoliberalism was made up by a relatively familiar series of policies and

consequences, the ‘post neoliberal pink tide’ or ‘left turn’ has had a lot more internal variation in the implementation and consequences of its economic and social policies.¹⁴⁶

Whereas Southern Cone economies either implemented or cemented neoliberal structural adjustment in the context of the transition from military rule, in Venezuela the turn to fiscal orthodoxy took place in the context of the terminal crisis of an already ‘consolidated’ liberal democracy. This could well be why the implementation of neoliberal policies in Venezuela triggered the cataclysmically explosive *caracazo* (see the first chapter of this dissertation). Similarly, Venezuela’s pride of place among pink tide states can also be seen as an extension or as another iteration of its ‘exceptional’ status as both wealthy and democratic in a region long defined in terms of inequality, civil war, and authoritarianism. By the 1990s, “the very elements that were critical to the origins and long-term stability of the political system [in Venezuela] (strong parties, low social conflict in a ‘managed’ civil society, and a dominant state paid for by oil revenues) [were] taken as reason for its decay” (Crisp and Levine 1998, 28). Or, as Julia Buxton (2009) estimates, the “orthodox turn” broke the previously established Venezuelan social contract “under which illiberal democracy was legitimate so long

¹⁴⁶ This is not to suggest that Concertación governments faced no protest or social upheaval. Mapuche indigenous resistance to the expropriation and privatization of ancestral lands continues as it has since colonization. Throughout 2006 the so-called ‘penguino’ (penguin) protests, strikes, and occupations pitted mostly high school students against government policies aimed at eliminating subsidies for transportation, the rising costs of education, and the deepening of the enclosure of public space (Hatfield 2006). The waves of protests, some of which included more than 700,000 students, were described as ‘penguins’ because of the uniforms worn by Chilean students.

as oil rents were channeled to the population” (156). In other words, pre-neoliberal Venezuela was politically stable only in so far as it could ‘buy’ its way out of social antagonism.

This is of course not to suggest that pre-neoliberal Venezuela was a proverbial land of milk and honey. This was after all *la cuarta república* of which Vincent spoke when pointing to collapsing shanties. The dynamics of the oil economy resulted in a lop-sided, top-heavy working population in which petrol workers – a relatively thin slice of the working class – and the petroleum and *comprador* or import sector more generally exerted a disproportionate influence on social and economic policy in Venezuela (Gates 2010; Tinker Salas 2009).

Beyond the question of policy, Emilio Pradilla Cobos (2009) reminds us that urbanization is both quantitatively and qualitatively determined by the form taken by capitalist development (21). In other words, not only is the class structure of a given society determined in large part by the mode of production, but so too is its physical infrastructure and architecture. The shape of ‘pre-neoliberal’ cities in Venezuela were thus sculpted by oil: posh and ultra-modern city cores with some of the largest shopping malls in Latin America served white collar oil sector workers, local employees of foreign firms, *comprador* merchants, and government bureaucrats. These were surrounded by multiplying rings of slums for the steady flow of the rural migrants occupied in the overlapping informal, construction, and service sectors. Neoliberalism resulted in a quantitative and qualitative exaggeration of this pattern. There was, finally, no shortage of unrest or upheaval in this moment: the 1960s and

70s saw an active *guevarista* insurrection in the country, rising crime rates in the cities, and widespread discontent with the maldistribution of the country's ample wealth (Ellner and Tinker Salas 2007a; Gott 2008; Neuhouser 1992)

Nonetheless, Venezuelan governments from 1958 to 1989 were able to maintain a high degree of *relative* social peace. This ability to maintain a tenuous oil-financed stability ended when the regional economic crisis triggered by Mexico's sovereign debt default exacerbated problems within the Venezuelan economy. Edgardo Lander (1996) notes that by the time of Venezuela's 'Black Friday' in February 1983 in which the administration of Luis Herrera Campins devalued the Bolívar, "the accumulation model based on the distribution of oil revenue had become exhausted, making substantial changes in the direction of the country's economy unavoidable" (50). However, rather than politically adjusting to a new reality, successive administrations in Venezuela had already shifted from a reliance on oil monies to foreign aid in order to maintain corrupt distribution schemes.

The country's long-standing inability to adequately absorb capital into new industrial and infrastructure projects typical of 'Dutch Disease' effects further intensified pre-existing macroeconomic disequilibria. Due to the overvaluation of the Bolívar during the lush oil years of the 1970s it was effectively *much* cheaper import manufactured goods than to produce them domestically.¹⁴⁷ These dynamics were

¹⁴⁷ A political logic to this pattern was established during the early twentieth century rule of Juan Vicente Gómez who nurtured comprador sectors and the representatives of foreign capital in order to prevent any domestic power base capable of challenging his rule from emerging. This strategy was maintained all the way up to the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez (Coronil 1997; Silva Luongo 2005).

further intensified throughout the 1980s as real-cash payments on external debts were prioritized and new loans were taken out by the government in order to maintain the political pacts of previous years. However, without local projects in which to invest, foreign exchange distributed to the private sector was simply and almost immediately invested abroad: Venezuelan governments borrowed themselves into insolvency in order to distribute stimulus funds that were then invested abroad (on this phenomenon see, in addition to Lander, Coronil 1997; Karl 1997; Mommer 1996).

The crisis Carlos Andrés Pérez inherited when he was elected in 1988 was thus a very real one.¹⁴⁸ Though he campaigned on an anti-neoliberal platform, it has since been shown that his ‘gran viraje’ (great turn around) to neoliberal orthodoxy was always in the making. The program announced by Pérez after taking office had been written by the national chamber of commerce under the leadership of transnational lending and development associations. As Lander (1996) notes, agreements that would quite literally result in the destruction of Venezuela’s very social and political order “were not submitted for consideration to the Congress of the Republic and were made public only *after* they had been signed. They were signed by the Venezuelan government in Washington toward the end of February 1989” (53). In other words, the architects of Pérez’s *gran viraje* worked without fear of political accountability, an example of neoliberalism’s ‘post-politics’ of democracy-free economic planning and rule by decree. Almost immediately after the announcement

¹⁴⁸ Pérez, it should be noted, was also instrumental in creating the foreign-debt crisis during his first term in office in the late 1970s.

of what is since known as the *paquetazo* (package bomb), Caracas and other major cities erupted into social upheaval that left thousands of Venezuelans dead.

Neoliberalism's record in Venezuela is thus unequivocal. After an initial improvement in the balance of payments, the trade balance, and the level of foreign reserves, "by 1992 many of these accomplishments had been reversed" and, against the grain of structural adjustment's stated aims, "the recovery of the growth rate was possible only because of an increase in foreign loans," the only goal that was fully achieved was the "capacity to repay the external debt" (55). What is more, by the time of Andrés Pérez's impeachment in 1992, public expenditure had *increased* as a proportion of the national economy and with it the fiscal deficit, the oil industry became *more*, not less central to the national economy, the tax system remained ineffective and riddled with loopholes, deindustrialization picked up speed, and inflation rates soared (57-59). All of these results were diametrically opposed to the stated goals and rationale behind the adjustment. While the policy was indeed successful in its unstated goal of redistributing and concentrating wealth with the already wealthy (with the same rationale as 'trickle down' economics in the United States), private investment, job creation, and a general equalizing trend did not follow (59).

In terms of labor, Lander finds that the net results of the neoliberalization of the Venezuelan economy lowered costs via the "reduction of employees, labor flexibilization, dualization and reduction in skills of the labor force, intensification of work, and reduction of real wages" (61). For labor, the Venezuelan economy thus

became much more tenuous and informal across the board as money flowed to owning classes both foreign and domestic and inequality grew at an accelerating pace. During the four years prior to the announcement of the structural adjustment policy – also a time of economic crisis and minimal neoliberal reforms – income distribution “varied only slightly. Between 1988 and 1991, however, whereas the share of the poorest decile fell from 2.3 to 1.8 percent, that of the richest increased from 30.3 to 43 percent [...] in 1988 the ratio between the labor income of the poorest 10 percent of the population and that of the richest 10 percent was 1 to 13.2, by 1991 this ratio had increased to 1 to 23.9” (63). In other words, even if we assume neoliberalism to primarily and consciously be focused on economic programs and the state policies associated with facilitating capitalist globalization, these maneuvers entailed the social restructuring of the localities in which they were implemented.

Indeed, Williamson’s (2004) ten-point program for economic and social restructuring – targeted at Latin American states and meant to redesign them according to the model of the ‘Asian Tigers’ (5) – was as he contends more than a simple recipe for neoliberalism. The Consensus was more than a rollback of the state’s social welfare apparatuses, the privatization of state-owned enterprises, or the opening up of trade barriers. The Washington Consensus sought not to shrink the state – as it is often incorrectly characterized – but rather to *redirect the state’s energies* and scrutiny to secure the most business-friendly environment possible (Harvey 2006a). More accurately, neoliberalism and the imposition of the Consensus in Latin America were processes aimed at restructuring what David Harvey (2006b) describes as the

“territoriality of social infrastructures” that “define particular frameworks for class struggle” by producing social subjects and the stakes of struggle in which they engage (398). Neoliberalism, that is, sought to produce and enforce a *habitus* that would facilitate the upward flow of capital and social wealth without the need for the messy and expensive enforcement of constituted power’s repressive apparatuses.

In Venezuela subjects engendered by the neoliberal *habitus* were intensely individualized and thus vulnerable. Bodies were inscribed in a paradoxical logic that states first ‘there is no public’ in the form of collective interests and responsibilities for the welfare of the common but immediately thereafter that ‘they’ must make good on ‘their’ collectively-shared debts. That is, the state was seen as incapable of providing for the basic needs of public to the point of rendering the public itself an illusory concept. Yet the state and the public continued to exist in terms of their contractual obligations to transnational lending institutions. Those that did not fight the formation and enforcement of this order were either absorbed in its *de facto* representation of reality as natural or benefited from the new opportunities for profit it offered to those with the capital to purchase newly privatized concerns. The mass of the population became increasingly unconvinced that there was anything salvageable in the *cuarta república*, which can be partially gauged in the fact that Chávez, the convicted coup-plotter campaigning on rewriting the constitution, won his first election by such a crushing margin (his 56% to the runner up’s 40%).¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ *Partially* because the 1998 contests also saw the lowest voter turnout of any subsequent presidential election in Venezuela.

The infrastructure and *habitus* of neoliberalism with which Harvey is concerned constitute the conditions of possibility for the realization of surplus value in the neoliberal phase of the capitalist world system. They allow value to circulate, but also support the ‘preproduction’ processes – for example: education, social and individual reproduction through family and state welfare services, and the regulation of knowledge regimes – by which labor power is produced. In the case of neoliberal restructuring in Venezuela, they can also be seen to operate through their absence. Precarity is produced and regulated through the shuffling of resources from the state’s social welfare capacities to its repressive, military, and police apparatuses. The imagined subjects of neoliberalism shifts from elements of a collective – a *pueblo* or a citizenry – to a much more fragmented and monadic agglomeration; a shift that also entails a transition from a biopolitical ethos of care and exposure to the threat management of the control society (Foucault 2003, 2010).

Glancing ahead to the contemporary crisis and reconfigurations of capital, Gopal Balakrishnan (2011) notes that this sort of thinking – from either side of adjustment – assumes that another expansionary cycle waits just around the corner. Looking at the time period between the crises of the 1970s and those of the present, we can now recognize that the lost decades and global neoliberal restructuring were not “crises of creative destruction” but were rather distributive feints as the hegemonic forms of the global economy moved from manufacture to finance capital (213). The damming of resource flows to social welfare institutions, in other words, was not carried out in the name of creating new forms of labor for a new frontier of

productive practices – as one might be able to plausibly if coldly suggest with the industrial revolution’s enclosures of the commons. Dispossession did not trigger innovation, only speculation. In Latin America, previous state-run and often large-scale programs of ‘modernization’ and ‘development’ focused on infrastructure and industry were privatized in the interests of ‘efficiency.’ International bond markets took the place of World Bank loans to national governments, even though these governments time and again were required to bail out bad investments either in whole or in the form of the social repercussions of sudden unemployment, unaffordable goods or services, or public discontent at overnight privatizations and rate hikes (on this shift from a global perspective, see the edited volume by Calhoun and Derluigiian 2011).

Elsewhere Harvey (2006a) illustrates how neoliberal and Washington Consensus policies helped the United States “pump high rates of return [back] into the country from its operations (both from direct and portfolio investments) in the rest of the world. It was the flow of tribute from the rest of the world that founded much of the affluence achieved [in the United States] in the 1990s” (33). However, and importantly,

the uneven geographical development of neo-liberalism [...] was as much an outcome of diversification, innovation and competition (sometimes of the monopolistic sort) between national, regional and in some instances even metropolitan models of governance and economic development, rather than the imposition of some model of orthodoxy by some hegemonic power, such as the US (34).

In other words, despite the fact that the Washington Consensus, Neoliberalism, and US Hegemony have become synonymous – perhaps nowhere more so than in

contemporary Venezuela – the story is more complex. While these are no doubt highly interrelated phenomena, they should nonetheless be understood as distinct but articulated phenomena. Put bluntly: Neoliberalism must be understood as more than a bundle of neoclassical economic policies, more than domestic deregulation and privatization of industry, more than the financialization of preexisting capital markets, and more than the sum of its parts. It is rather *a complex totality within the complex totality that is the capitalist world system*, an articulated and contingent – certainly more contingent than many of its most vocal detractors would admit – apparatus that produces forms of sociality and subjectivity (for example, the informal sector, fragmentation, and debt). To battle neoliberalism does not therefore necessarily mean the same as battling capitalism. Neoliberalism exists within capitalism but does not consist of a distinct mode of production. What is more, in the context of globalization, to situate oneself against the Washington Consensus can no longer entail the anti-imperialism of the twentieth century. Indeed, imperialism itself has entered a new and distinct phase, and therefore so too must resistance.

Does this, apropos a shallow reading of Hardt and Negri's (2000) *Empire*, suggest that neoliberalism has resulted in a global political economy that is somehow 'after' the hegemony of the US or that of any other state? Or that the all pervasiveness of the system has resulted in a world without outsides, opposition, or even discernable victims, culprits, winners, or losers? Far from it. Either position falls into a 'post-politics' that Jodi Dean (2009) has traced as shuttling between the "ideal of consensus, inclusion, and administration" and the "contemporary exclusion or foreclosure of the

political” (13). From the perspective of the left, in other words, they are characteristic of a “left melancholia” (Brown 1999) that seemed for much of the late 1990s and throughout the administration of George W. Bush to characterize would-be anti-systemic elements in the Global North. Indeed, while accounting for the vast degree of internal variation among the so-called ‘pink tide’ governments in Latin America and the recent outburst of grassroots political rebellion¹⁵⁰ on a global scale all point to the prematurity of the ‘postpolitical’ theses of the 1980s and 1990s. In order to better consider the stakes of this turn and its implications for the Bolivarian process in Venezuela and anti-capitalist struggle more generally, it will first be necessary to consider neoliberalism’s attempt to replace politics with management, to foreclose the contest between ideologies and worldview, and to privatize any notion of the common or the public in the later decades of the twentieth century.

III. On Post-Politics, Neoliberalism, and its Aftermaths

In the previous sections I described the post-neoliberal shift at a regional level as both internally inconsistent and inconclusive, and that this has to do with the fact that neoliberalism extends beyond the economic philosophy with which it is most widely identified. Yet at the same time, it did not go so far as to create a new mode of

¹⁵⁰ At the time of this writing (Winter 2012), the global economic crisis that began in 2008 has yet to abate and resistance to the geopolitical and financial system’s response to that crisis is growing. A global cycle of rebellion attuned to local conditions has picked up incredible steam since student-led protests in the United States in 2009. There have since been battles against (to name only a few locations) structural adjustment in Egypt and Tunisia, the privatization of public education in Chile and the United States, against bank bailouts and financial collapse in North America and Europe and austerity in Greece and Spain. These have taken the form of intense ideological and physical battles and in some cases have resulted in the overthrow of governments.

production. It rather sought to dismantle the *habitus* of the post war developmentalist state that posited a confluence of interests between state, capital, and workers and replace them all with the interests and logic of the market. Neoliberalism in other words attempted to force a new social reality, but failed in part because of its lack of creative vision. It looked to produce a reality in which individual and collective subjects were stripped of the ability to resist the extraction of their labor power by subjecting all aspects of life to rule and the logic of capital but did not go so far as to produce new logics, modes, or relations of production. It was redistributive, not revolutionary. One of the symptoms or tactics (depending on your critical position) of this move to create a new *habitus* within the larger totality of capital was to attempt to ‘end’ politics as it had been known up until the 1970s. By better understanding the intersection of neoliberalism and the so-called post-political reality this section produces a clearer picture of the trajectory of contemporary anti-neoliberalism, its hopes, and its limitations. To do so, I explore two distinct but related valences of neoliberalism’s post-political turn: post-politics as the replacement of agonistic democracy for a technocratic rule by experts and police; and post-politics as the end of ideological alternatives signaled by the fall of the Soviet Union. Each of these variants, to the extent that they ever accurately explained the conjuncture in Venezuela or anywhere else, have been obviated by recent history.

Post-politics as the end of democracy

Neoliberalism did not, as I have argued, entail the ‘shrinking’ of state capacity *tout court*. Rather, neoliberalism entailed the shifting of the purpose and function of

states and, in the estimation of many, a *de-democratization* of the modern state form (see especially Rancière 1999, 2009). Ironically for many Latin American societies, this shift occurred precisely during the transition from military and authoritarian rule in the 1980s and 1990s, during which time politics moved from rule by generals to a “low-intensity democracy.” This new order, “in contrast to more popular conceptions of democracy, which see political power as a means for transforming unjust socioeconomic structures and democratizing social and cultural life [...] explicitly isolates the political from the socioeconomic sphere,” limiting democracy to the former and defining it exclusively in terms of scheduled electoral contests among candidates pre-approved by global financial institutions (Robinson 2006, 104). Any capacity to alter the scope and shape of economic power was safely left to the power of technocratic elites.

In Venezuela we have already seen that the structural adjustment of the Carlos Andrés Pérez administration was essentially written behind closed doors by unelected experts and only then, after it had effectively been put into practice and signed *in Washington D.C.*, was it brought to the congress for *post-festum* approval. Most generally, then, this element of neoliberalism-as-postpolitical highlights the shift of practice, protocol, and participation in constituted power whereby ‘public’ functions are increasingly carried out by experts and technocrats rather than by consensus, debate, and civic engagement.¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ About an earlier period in North America, Sheldon Wolin (2004) writes of a ‘new liberalism’ that emerged after the second world war that “remained state-centered, but its state was now imperial, its reflexes conditioned by anti-communism and Cold

Postpolitical neoliberalism also signals shifts in the location where the work of government takes place and a separation of its functions. In Latin America throughout the 1990s a number of charismatic ‘populists’ such as Alberto Fujimori in Peru and Carlos Menem in Argentina ran for and won the presidency on campaigns that were openly neoliberal (K. Roberts 1995). The street and the ballot box increasingly became mediated spectacles similar to US-style presidential campaigns. Democratic participation by the majority of the population took the form of spectatorship (viewing the campaign through a television, or increasingly in the twenty first century, via cell phones) or through inserting oneself into the spectacles of mass rallies on a scale not seen since the high tide of mid-twentieth century urbanization and industrialization (on this, see Martin-Barbero 1993). The location and exercise of power – for example, the power to eliminate or devalue the pensions of all past and present state employees – was increasingly located in conference rooms scattered across the centers of global finance. Politics, in other words, may have become affectively more mass-based and ‘popular’ in the course of the dual shift to neoliberalism and democracy. This expansion, however, took place at the expense of

War exigencies, its political outlook accommodative to elitism and its politics to technocratic conceptions of policy and expertise. Presiding over a boundaryless, power-oriented system engaged in cold and some hot wars, the expansive assumptions of liberal politicians and theoreticians perforce came to be interwoven with, and dependent upon, those of the economy and its corporate structures. Unsurprisingly, the anti-corporate ideology of the thirties rapidly evaporated, leaving scarcely a trace” (552). While this incubator for neoliberal postpolitics in the Cold War US is important both for the fact that it would eventually be imposed upon Latin America, and while local elites in the region also contributed to a market-centered conceptualization of society that often extended upon and reinforced their anti-democratic inclinations, the specificity of a *Latin American neoliberalism* results from a different genealogy.

politics being tied to any sort of power.

In many ways, this trend to depoliticize politics, especially electoral politics, has been carried through into the postneoliberal present. Fernando Ignacio Leiva (2008) notes that while neoliberalism sought to depoliticize the economy – correcting, as its supporters contend, the errors of state interventionism that characterized development strategies of the mid twentieth century – the new developmentalist strategy of ‘neoliberalism’ now emphasizes social cohesion, consensus, and other *bons mots* of the present ‘gentler face of economic globalization’ (of the supporters of structural adjustment, see for example Sachs 1985). However, as Leiva insists, “instead of offering tools for better understanding and redirecting powerful economic forces, Latin American neoliberalism plays the historical role of contributing to enmesh new and more effective forms of stabilizing, legitimizing, and regulating the status quo, as both Chile’s Concertación and Brazil’s Lula administration demonstrate” (237). This ultimately conservative move, Leiva insists, is all the more insidious in that it has in many cases *deepened* the de-democratizing effects of the first wave of neoliberal regimes in the region.

In particular, neoliberalism claims to “promot[e] consensus, participatory governance, new forms of state-civil society alliances, and incorporat[e] social capital in the design of public policy [in order to] ensure both growth and equity” (118). All of these political goals fit almost seamlessly with ‘alterglobalization’ slogans of the World Social Forum. However, as Leiva delves deeper into the machinations and priorities of what he refers to as the ‘new’ ECLAC, he finds no shortage of willful

omissions and analytical oversights that “undermine the coherence and consistency of Latin American neostructuralism” (117). In particular, the paradigm’s “liberal conception of the state as the depository of social responsibility ignores both the class character of the state as well as the fundamental role that it plays in securing conditions for reproducing capital accumulation” (118). This model of consensus-making results in what I would describe as a neocorporatist form of social organization – one designed to subordinate all interests and demands to an already established and uncontested goal. For example, neostructuralism recommends building “a new type of labor movement” oriented toward its goal of attaining “systemic competitiveness” which takes the place of the neoliberal principle of comparative advantage. Within this paradigm, the particular task of the labor movement becomes one of fostering and enforcing “participatory wage regimes” (read: performance-based pay) and an expansion of labor flexibility in the service of the export-oriented economy (5-11).

Politics is thus in this scheme less about antagonism or even agonism and more about a corporatist rendering of the social and the political that could be far better characterized as class-collaborationist than radical or even democratic. Similar critiques could be levied against neostructuralism’s attempts to “civiliz[e] the poor as consumers of services and self-regulating citizens” (118). In both of these positions we can see how the consensus of neostructuralism is a *fait accompli*. Rather than a process by which the direction of communities is determined, consensus has here already been achieved. The matter at hand for neostructuralism is to then create the

conditions on the ground whereby this consensus-in-principle can become a reality. Unions are thus expected to actively participate in making the workforce more efficient, and social services transform themselves into the self-checkout lanes of first world megamarts.

Neostructuralism presents itself as the ‘only viable alternative’ to neoliberalism. However, it does so “in the language of pragmatism, upholding a dehistoricized ‘technical progress’ and celebrating an international competitiveness sanitized from actually existing power relations” (23). The governments of Lula and now Rousseff in Brazil and *Concertación* in Chile best characterize neostructural political economy. Here “the ‘priority of the social,’ and the resumption of development, as a precondition for the former” prioritize and shape reform (Sader 2011, 53). In short, the economic continues to either dominate or direct the political in the aftermath of neoliberalism in much of Latin America. As such, neoliberalism’s ‘post-political’ removal of economic matters from potentially destabilizing public contention persists to this day in much of the region.

Post-Politics as the end of ideology (or alternatives)

Consensus on the primary importance and influence of the market and the imperative to develop a rule of the economy managed by qualified experts unbothered by the unwashed masses is in many ways a position that depends on the ‘end of history.’ While Francis Fukuyama’s (1992) much cited and much more debated thesis on the post-Cold War future need not be rehashed at present, the political scene in Latin America during the early 1990s saw his theses take the shape

of self-fulfilling prophecies. Atilio Boron (2005) describes this phenomenon as the establishment of a “singular politics” in which triumphant capitalism streamlined the function of public life to that of ensuring the safe functioning of the market (407). This singular politics of the 1990s was properly discursive: it created a bounded, enforceable, system of the sayable and thinkable. To act or speak against or outside this discursive universe was effectively to relegate oneself to the status of the insane or to label oneself a Castroite dinosaur. Even what was arguable the world’s first counterattack against neoliberalism with a global vision – Porto Alegre’s World Social Forum (WSF) – in many ways replicated neoliberalism’s socially fragmented and individualist worldview. Refusing to develop even a minimal program for opposition to neoliberal capitalism, the WSF instead chose to privilege the distinctness and autonomy of movements, associating without unifying anarchists, micro-finance NGOs, and ostensibly-friendly heads of state around the feel-good and intentionally-vague slogan ‘another world is possible.’ That the WSF did little to actually trace the contours of this potential world is perhaps testament to the pervasiveness of a global postpolitical condition (Sader 2011).

The North Atlantic mantra ‘there is no alternative’ took hold in Latin America throughout the ‘lost decades,’ as the forces of globalization, neoliberalism, and (liberal-representative) democratization became increasingly synonymous and hegemonic. As Fernando Henrique Cardoso – former President of Brazil and before that, former theorist of the dependency school – put it, “within globalization, no alternative, outside globalization, no salvation” (quoted in Coronil 2011, 237). Social

Democrats like Jorge Castañeda (1994) warned what remained of the left at the time that “in contemporary politics and economic globalization, refusing to play on the same playing field [of the Washington Consensus], no matter how tilted, amounts to condemning oneself to marginality” (427). In such a situation the regional left’s best hope for survival and influence lay in “being a lesser evil” than forces that would only seek to entrench and deepen the region’s endemic inequality, underdevelopment, and poverty (428).

Whether one reads this politics as realism, cowardice, or opportunism is less significant than is its universality during the 1990s. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba was definitively isolated. In Nicaragua, the Sandinistas peacefully transferred power when voted out of office in 1990. Civil wars in Guatemala and El Salvador would end by the mid 1990s, in both cases demobilization brought with it immunity for the death squads, the continuation of crushing inequality, and the moderation of the guerrillas as the URNG and FMLN entered electoral politics.¹⁵² On the South American continent itself, the twin imperatives of democratization and pro-market reforms seemed unchallengeable. If we provisionally consider Carl Schmitt’s (1996) minimum definition of politics as centering on distinction and decision, then across the region neoliberalism severely constricted the choices and alternatives to rule by the market. Rather than a confrontation between friends and enemies – or better, between mutually-exclusive political ontologies or programs – throughout the 1980s and 1990s leaders in the economy, in politics, and in the media

¹⁵² The Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional de Guatemala and the Frente de Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional, respectively.

worked hard to limit the political spectrum to varying degrees of celebration of Structural Adjustment. However, as Noberto Bobbio (1997) and numerous others have noted, “there is nothing more ideological than declaring the demise of ideologies” (3). The ‘end of alternatives’ to neoliberalism and the lack of alternatives to an ideology rooted in the reason of the market were and remains a carefully constructed and maintained project rather than an objective description of reality.

History did not end, as Fukuyama and other bards of capital announced. Rather, history, as an open site of conflict between competing modes and goals of social organization, was obscured, denied, and studiously ignored throughout the lost decades and the reign of neoliberalism. As John Beverly (2011) contends, neither globalization nor neoliberalism represent new stages of the capitalist mode of production, each with their own unique distinctions and dynamics. He suggests rather that “the historical paradigm that is more immediately pertinent to Latin America is not the idea that globalization under neoliberal auspices represents a new historical stage. It is rather that of a restoration, on the model of the period that follows the death of Napoleon and waning of the radicalizing impulse of the French and Haitian Revolutions between the congress of Vienna and the revolutionary upsurges of 1848” (101). He continues,

A restoration represents the blockage of a historical process that has already been set in motion, rather than its transcendence [...] to put this another way, the social and economic contradictions that give rise to the process are not structurally modified or transformed by a restoration; they are simply repressed or deferred, prevented from coming to fruition in a new historical stage. But the contradictions continue to be present and active under the surface of the conservative status quo (101).

In other words, rather than the end of one form of history, or of one historical form of politics, neoliberalism (and the globalization of capital of which it was part), forced these politics ‘underground,’ or to take different forms. Neoliberalism did not end class society, did not end inequality nor injustice. As such, one cannot without delusion hope to see neoliberalism as in any way ending the clash, however expressed, between the dispossessed and their dispossessors.

However, if the 1980s and 1990s were characterized by the celebration or grudging acceptance of neoliberal capitalism, actors in the post-neoliberal present have yet to strike new paths. In his final essay, the late Fernando Coronil (2011) contends, “it has become common in Latin America to entertain the belief that actually existing capitalism is unviable for the long term while recognizing that socialism as it has actually existed offers no viable models for the future” (234). Even worse, he contends the contemporary Latin American left’s focus on the critique of neoliberalism “obscures an acceptance of capitalism” (238). In short, “we have a capitalism for a present without a future, and a socialism for a future without a present” (250). In one of the most shocking expressions of this development, Álvaro García Linera (2006) current Vice President of Bolivia and at one time one of the region’s most interesting and innovative theorists of the multitude, has suggested an ‘Andean-Amazonian Capitalism,’ under the guidance of a strong and interventionist state, must be developed before nations like his own can progress toward socialism. This conjuncture lends itself to all manner of cynical readings from the left, at the extreme end including those that critique (in particular) the governments of Chávez,

Morales, and Correa as being traitors to the cause of global justice for extending the policies of their predecessors while talking the talk of socialism (see, in particular, Beasley-Murray 2011; J. Webber 2011). In the aftermath of ideology or ideological alternatives to neoliberalism to spread globally, then, even socialism is capitalism.¹⁵³

Neoliberalism thus carried with it an end to politics insofar as it was able to effectively de-politicize and de-democratize the public sector, particularly in those elements of state practice that had direct impacts on the market, and secondly to the extent that the *habitus* that is and was neoliberalism relegated alternative modes of organizing collective life to the unthinkable. A final element of neoliberalism as postpolitics traverses de-democratization and the foreclosure of alternatives: postpolitics as social fragmentation and the reign of the individual. While there has been much written in the United States about the ostensible withering of civil society and public or semi-public spaces in late capitalism (see, most famously, Putnam 2001), there is also much to be said of this in Latin America of the same era. Marta Harnecker (2006) gives this reality an explicitly political dimension, one that she describes as the “social-fragmenting strategy of neoliberalism.” This is a social order in which “different minority groups cannot combine themselves into a majority that challenges the existing hegemonic order. *This* is the best formula for the reproduction

¹⁵³ The implication here is that the ostensibly most radical edges of the pink tide also aim to replicate a watered down postwar European social democratic state. The fear on the left is that this arrangement can only follow the example of the German Social Democrats in the early Cold War, champions of “socialism *and* competition [...] ‘as much competition as possible and as much planning as necessary’” (quoted in Foucault 2010, 89).

of the existing order” (38).¹⁵⁴ In other words, the postpolitical condition was one that claimed democratic participation and the clash of ideologies had been replaced by an individualization of social identity and social problems. This fragmentation allowed for previous functions of mass, popular, politics to be replaced by technologies of policing and consumer choice (Rancière 2010). However, to claim that these developments amounted to the end of politics, rather than a shift in the tactics *within* a previously established field of forces, is a position that is only tenable if one has wholly and completely accepted neoliberalism’s self-serving autobiography.

It is thus better to not consider neoliberalism along the axis of politics-postpolitics, but rather as one of many ways in which constituted power has captured, or attempted to capture, or at the very least present the image of having already captured, constituent power. Put somewhat differently: by announcing the end of politics – a politics that is open, conjunctural, contentious, and dangerous – postpolitical neoliberalism merely reproduced one of the most fundamental traits of the political by positing a definition and terrain of what is at stake in its contest with a mutually-exclusive other and to prolong its own existence. Indeed, and again giving the lie to its supporters, this cannot and does not mean neoliberalism amounted first or foremost to an attack on the Keynesian welfare state. Indeed, “neoliberalism was not just a break with postwar Keynesian deficit spending but a continuation of it by other means, that is, by a long-term macroeconomic stimulus that drove up the value

¹⁵⁴ “Una sociedad dividida – en que diferentes grupos minoritarios no logran constituirse en una mayoría cuestionadora de la hegemonía vigente – es la mejor fórmula para la reproducción del sistema.”

of financial assets and, in many countries, real estate, with little regard for hard budgetary constraints, in either the private or public sectors” (Balakrishnan 2011, 219). In other words, and repeating what has already been repeated, the ‘break’ constituted by neoliberalism was well within the parameters of then-existing capitalism – even those it has often been depicted as challenging most directly.

We thus return before concluding to the primary question of this chapter, and indeed, of this dissertation: what does it mean to come ‘after’ neoliberalism? If neoliberalism was more than economic policy, more than de-democratization, but *less than* a distinct social order; if neoliberalism was closer to a modulation of the modern social contract than a break from it then what does it mean to be anti-neoliberal today? Is antineoliberalism sufficient or even necessary to create ‘another possible world’ that breaks with the very dynamics that gave it birth? If, in other words, neoliberalism is one among many political measures by which constituted power captures, directs, and feeds off of constituent power, then can an analytical disposition and politics built on this dyad be reasonably expected to fare any better?

IV. Towards a Conclusion: Constituent and Constituted Power after Neoliberalism

‘After neoliberalism’ is an odd designation, and intentionally so. The qualifying ‘after’ may signal the neoliberal project’s completion and success as much as its failure or end. What is more, the phrase does little to clarify the concept of neoliberalism itself. If ‘neoliberalism’ is seen to have concluded now that a majority of Latin American countries – where neoliberalism first moved from think tank to enacted

policy a generation ago – are ruled by ostensibly left-of-center presidencies rests on the identification of neoliberalism with the power of the executive branch. If we define neoliberalism with orthodox pro-market policies, we might see it as having ended as early as the mid-nineties, when even the market’s staunchest proponents (like Peru’s Fujimori) saw the need to provide some modicum of support for those most negatively effected by structural adjustment. At a minimum, the mixed economic models currently favored by Venezuela, Bolivia, and Brazil were by no means unimaginable or necessarily viewed as undesirable in the neoliberal 1990s.

With this in mind, Jon Beasley-Murray’s (2010) earlier contention vis-à-vis the recent ‘left turns’ – “all this talk of left turns and what comes next ignores the fact that the electoral successes are themselves the result of prior changes the status quo has *already* shifted. The self-styled left is less the agent of change than its beneficiary” (127) – is all the more provocative. Beasley-Murray argues that the *electoral* left has only capitalized on changes forced by the multitudinous bodies that resisted neoliberalism (and then disappeared) in Caracas in 1989, in Cochabamba in 2000 and 2004, and in Argentine factories and streets from 1999 to 2002. He contends that these eruptions were true glimpses into new and spontaneous solidarities that resisted and perhaps might again one day resist the patterns of the social contract, liberal governance, and a modern rationality that is defined in terms of its proximity or antagonism to the capitalist market. For Beasley-Murray, this dynamic troubles the very idea of a significant division between the region’s left and right. The question in this register is

thus not one of neoliberalism-postneoliberalism, but rather of constituent and constituted power.

Returning to Venezuela, Chávez and the movements that circulate around him are characteristic of modernity's attempt to both utilize the powers of the multitude whilst promising governability to the owning classes.¹⁵⁵ Chávez is thus “the epitome of constituted versus constituent power, but also the demonstration of the former's reliance on the latter” (140). In such a fashion, then, what is really at stake in Bolivarian Venezuela and left-of-center Latin America more generally cannot be measured on the ‘left-right’ axis, but must rather be understood as concerning “the legacy of Creole Republicanism” (129). The question, in other words, is about power, not ideology. Or better, it is about ideology at the level of producing bodies rather than that of enforcing ideas. Left and right alike for Beasley-Murray share a political ontology rooted in the modern nation-state, itself an apparatus that is parasitic on the energies of the multitude.

The question of revolution, change, power, and the republican form has come up elsewhere in Latin American political and critical circles, highlighting ethical and practical limitations to this framework. Walter Mignolo (2005), for example, traces this dilemma of the republic as a tool for liberation limited by the context of its formation to the origins of the ‘idea’ of Latin America.’ Latin America – modern, secular, and built on Enlightenment ideals of progress, equality, and rationality – amounts to “that sad [idea] of the elites celebrating their dreams of becoming modern

¹⁵⁵ See Chapter One of this dissertation.

while they slide deeper and deeper into the logic of coloniality” (58).¹⁵⁶ The concern underlying Beasley-Murray and Mignolo’s interventions revolves around the matter of whether or not the moves of *political* actors – regardless of their origins or orientations – have *ever* accurately captured (for Beasley-Murray) the specificity of the global historical moment and the constituent power of the multitude or (for Mignolo), merely reproduced the exclusionary, raced, and classed power dynamics of the Eurocentric modern/colonial capitalist world system. From either perspective, that of the authentically revolutionary or of the authentically local, any analysis that rests content with the victory of left-of-center governments misses the mark in terms of a drive to liberate the region and its inhabitants from long-standing systems of oppression and domination.¹⁵⁷

The question of neoliberalism and its aftermaths thus has to do with where and how democracy can be possible in Venezuela today. If as I have argued throughout this dissertation democracy is something that both depends upon and reproduces a sense of the common and the shared, then neoliberalism can be seen as anti-democratic insofar as it dwells within and reinforces a *habitus* that fragments the social and privileges the individual over the many. Ever opposed to this multitudinous democracy, neoliberalism produced polyarchy and increased inequality (Robinson

¹⁵⁶ On coloniality, see Chapter Two of this dissertation.

¹⁵⁷ This reading of Mignolo is against his own stated personal belief that Chávez in Venezuela and Morales in Bolivia constituted institutional manifestations of a non-Eurocentric decolonial shift. I deploy this against-the-grain reading of Mignolo’s ‘idea of Latin America’ to highlight the structural impediments of the Creole republic as a liberatory implement in Latin America to highlight the structurally raced and classed nature of constituent and constituted power.

2006). This chapter has introduced a number of conceptualizations of what neoliberalism was – neoclassical economics, the end of democratic participation or democratic controls on the economy, or the total victory of Cold War liberalism – in order to diagnose what postneoliberalism is or might hope to be. Along those lines, we must also consider the substance and concept of democracy itself – the relation between constituent and constituted power – as articulated in the Bolivarian project. To carry out such a labor results in at least two theoretical and political consequences and imperatives. The first, most close to that of Beasley-Murray, sees revolutionary democratic openings as fleeting events or explosions that are mutually exclusive from institutionalization. I call this first approach the ‘fugitive democracy’ conclusion to the question of post-neoliberal power.

I borrow the expression ‘fugitive democracy’ from Sheldon Wolin (2004), in part because I feel it more accurately describes Beasley-Murray and others’ position than the perhaps more intuitive or seductive (given the keywords of their work) qualifier ‘multitudinous’ for at least two reasons. The first is that Beasley-Murray (2011) himself hesitates in the face of what he considers the messianic and monstrous consequences of Negri’s theorization of the multitude when inserted into a Latin American context. Beasley-Murray chooses instead to persist in the ‘perhaps’ of indeterminacy and the conjuncture. The future will come, but at present we have neither the capacity to anticipate its specific shape nor the tools to understand its implications. Secondly, this dissertation has more often than not settled on a similar dissatisfaction at the choice between *either* complementary *or* mutually exclusive

understanding of the relation between constituent and constituted power. Fugitive thus implies a circulation, a motion, and a structural relation between constituent power (as democracy) and constituted power (as democracy's capture) itself defined by evasion, creativity, subterfuge, and antagonism. To be fugitive is to be located in a structurally determined definition from which you are trying to escape, redefine, and the in most complete sense, to destroy. It is to identify a *habitus* and to resist it.

The second political and theoretical consequence offers a more potentially cautious view. One might uncharitably describe it in terms of making virtue of a necessity, or charitably as a creative and contingent adaptation. This view, typified most recently by Emir Sader (2011) approaches the present as a moment of transition between hegemonic forms, the results of which are far from certain. As such, Sader contends that the theoretical and political skittishness of many within the Latin American left around the question of state power has left the regional reaction to neoliberalism as a whole vulnerable to counterattack or endogenously-produced collapse (123).

Here, questions of constituent and constituted power remain of central importance, but cannot be delinked from each other. Nor – more importantly – can the relation be segregated from a global context in which Latin America as a region is subordinated militarily, economically, and politically to the North. While the global crisis in capitalism has done much to alter this dynamic in favor of Latin America, these gains can only be seen as tentative at best. Regional underdevelopment and instability mark the present as a moment in which consolidating advances must take

the same priority as moving forward. The imperative, in other words, rests not on the matter of democracy overcoming its capture or overflowing its banks yet again, but rather with the continued alteration of class structures, the fight against the commodification of life itself, and of delinking the region from the fixed rules of the global economy *through the instruments of constituted power*. I describe this line of thought as ‘strategic.’

The first approach contends all formations of constituted power are reactionary – both in the sense of being occasioned by constituent power as well as reactionary in the conventional sense of opposing further change. True democracy, in this sense, is a precious and fleeting thing, and the present ‘left turn’, particularly in places like Venezuela, amounts to little more than old wine in new bottles. Sifting through the historical record, this conclusion is supported by the high degrees of continuity between contemporary institutional formations and those they ostensibly replaced. In Venezuela, the singular importance of the oil economy has resulted in these continuities being all the more striking.

Julie Buxton (2009) highlights four key elements of continuity between the Bolivarian Revolution and Venezuela’s Fourth Republic. The first, weak institutions, has also been accompanied by the country’s historically rather strong presidency (170). While wanting to avoid the sort of institutionalism of much mainstream writing in the political sciences – where a lack of a professional, modern, and rationalized bureaucracy and established party system is tantamount to authoritarian or hybrid

(less-than-democratic) forms of governance¹⁵⁸ – the highly arbitrary, unevenly politicized, and almost always self-interested nature of the bureaucracy in Venezuela is seen by many activists and observers as dangerous and seemingly insurmountable obstacles to deepening the revolution.¹⁵⁹ At a bare minimum and without speculating on how contemporary institutions enable, constrain, or direct the scope of change in Venezuela today, the Venezuelan state in the second half of the twentieth century has always been an entrepreneurial, contesting, and unsettled body. Little in my research would lead me to suggest otherwise.

Buxton's (2009) three other elements of continuity are both self-evident and ambivalent. Bolivarian Venezuela remains as dependent on oil as were its predecessor regimes (171). Indeed, this may well be the key threat to its ability to maintain its present course. Aside from the fact that this means the current mode of democratizing consumption without fundamentally impacting the fundamental class nature of society – what Fernando Ingacio Leiva (2008) describes in terms of “unlinking distribution from accumulation” (108) – also reinforces the centrality of the state in *any* mode of social reproduction in Venezuela. Buxton (2009) alleges that this has led to the perennial “failure to consensually define the role of the state” (171). Thus, *setting aside for the time being that consensus itself obscures any number of alternative ways of being in the*

¹⁵⁸ See, for example, Corrales (2002) and McCoy (2010).

¹⁵⁹ See, for example, Martinez, Fox, and Farrell (2010) and Spronk et al. (2011).

world, politics in Bolivarian Venezuela remain brittle and organized in the same way as politics in the Fourth Republic.¹⁶⁰

Buxton's final noted similarity is perhaps the most troubling for those who defend the Bolivarian Revolution on strictly anti-imperialist lines. She writes that even in the Fourth Republic the *puntofijo* parties agreed on a foreign policy dedicated to "Bolivarian principles of multipolarism, of supporting progressive revolutionary movements (e.g. the Sandinistas in Nicaragua), of building a just international order promoting solutions to the conflict in Colombia, and of building ties with other oil producing nations" (172). Of course, the use of 'Bolivarian' illustrates the historical

¹⁶⁰ To this must be added, however, an important caveat. The founding document of late twentieth century Fourth Republic Venezuela, the 'Puntofijo pact,' was created in order to 'script' politics after the overthrow of Marcos Pérez Jiménez. Among the various 'rules of the game' drafted by the three signatory parties was the *de facto* exclusion of the Communist Party of Venezuela and an agreement on the minimum terms of how government in the postdictatorship era would function. As such, it has been recognized by any number of analysts as an exclusionary, 'pacted' democracy (Levine 2002). Politics in the Fourth Republic was thus explicitly exclusionary and antagonistic to an outside other. Today, any number of centrist and liberal critics from North America have noted with concern Chávez's continued popularity in the polls, assuming that the one-sidedness of Venezuelan electoral politics can only be the result of manipulation and intimidation on the part of *oficialismo* (see for example Corrales and Penfold-Becerra 2007). As such, the intense polarization, antagonism, and marginalization of opposition candidates are seen as results of Chávez the anti-democratic puppeteer. These accounts tend to discount the degree to which the opposition in Venezuela has routinely discredited itself through blatant racism and extraparliamentary violence in its early years and more recently with its student wing; due to its own political miscalculations in a recall campaign in 2004 and the boycott of national and regional elections (mostly for the benefit of Human Rights' NGOs based in Washington and Miami); and most damningly, in its utter lack of any sort of political, social, economic, or cultural vision other than 'anti-Chávez.' One could thus say that *at the state level* Venezuelan politics remain rather one-sided and exclusionary and that the state remains what it has historically: an object of capture. *However*, to neglect the reasons behind this continuity is to make a rather grievous category mistake.

malleability of the figure of Simón Bolívar. While Bolivarianismo in the Fourth Republic did in fact suggest a multipolarity similar to that espoused by Chávez today, it is a multipolarity entirely sculpted by the Cold War and post-dictatorship context in which it was developed. The Bolivarianismo of the Fourth Republic was resolutely anti-communist, its regional-integrationism justified complicity in Operation Condor and other elements of the Southern Cone's 'Dirty War Against Subversion' in the 1970s, and it often resulted in frosty relations with Havana. While Venezuela was a founding and influential member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), this can be seen much more in terms of self-interest than solidarity, and by its deepening financial crises of 1990s Venezuela was among the first to break with the cartel – at Washington's behest – in order to temporarily increase revenue inflows (Coronil 1997, 52).

What is to be made of these historical continuities between the Fourth Republic and the present? And in particular, what do these continuities have to say of the relation between constituent and constituted power in contemporary Venezuela? The 'fugitive democracy' rendering of accounts suggests that representative political structures share a fundamental limit in their ability to adapt to the powers of the bodies they claim as their own. Indeed, recent memory is replete with examples of ostensibly elected governments repressing the democratic excesses of its citizens.¹⁶¹ As

¹⁶¹ Importantly, this has not occurred in Venezuela to date, even in cases where opposition groups funded and trained by the United States – either in the 'Plan Guarimba' of 2004 or the anti-government student protests leading up to the constitutional referendum in 2008 (Golinger 2006, 2008) – have themselves resorted to violence.

such, and even in the absence of Occupy Wall Street style violent crackdowns on dissent, the Bolivarian process in Venezuela will eventually have to deal with the challenge of morphing itself into ever less static or institutionalized, more horizontal and fluid, less constituted forms – especially when even sympathetic observers such as Buxton are calling for it to rationalize itself in order to consolidate its gains in human well being *within in the over-arching context of the modern nation-state*.

Finally, if democracy is seen as rooted in fleeting experiences of the common, then the very structure of the modern, sovereign, nation state is antithetical to the exercise and enhancement of constituent power. Neoliberalism thus becomes something rather beside the point, as the ‘true’ question of an authentic and liberatory power resides outside of the statist framework without which neoliberalism could not exist. Indeed, a post-neoliberalism that does not break with this framework might be all the worse in that it presents itself as an alternative when in fact it reinforces a mandated closure of liberatory political sequences.

Self-appointed ‘strategic’ thinkers such as Emir Sader (2011) and Enrique Dussel (2006) consider the fugitive and multitudinous democrats to be little more than contemporary bearers of what Lenin (1920) called the “infantile disorder” of ultra-leftism or “left-wing communism.” For this line of reasoning, the art of thinking and acting politically entails locating a long-term goal and recognizing that insurrectionary struggle and institutional organization are both required to reach it. More to the point, this line of analysis contends that struggle is inevitable but institutionalization is not. As such, the latter is in many ways more important than the

former. The strategist thus contends one must maintain a utopian horizon but cannot indulge in the messianic dream that the future will arrive without our labor having constructed it.

Along this second line of thinking, Diana Tussie (2009) characterizes the regional ‘left turn’ as a foreseeable reaction to the excesses of previous decades, whereby “in true Polanyian fashion, leftist parties (and on occasions the same leftist leaders) have been voted back into office out of the ashes of neoliberalism. But, at the same time, the left has changed” (69). For Tussie, however, the current reaction to neoliberalism also carries out a decisive step away from a fashioned ‘virtuous cycle’ whereby society corrects for the planned attacks by the market on the common good.¹⁶² The unifying thread among the regional left has been a stated aim to rewrite the social contract, made explicit and carried out in Venezuela (in 1999), in Ecuador (in 2008), and Bolivia (in 2009), but one which implicitly drives movements for reform in the region (80).¹⁶³

¹⁶² Her characterization of Polanyi’s (2001) ‘double movement.’

¹⁶³ I would add by way of parentheses here that the one could also argue that the MST in Brazil and the EZLN in Mexico have also carried out a strategy tied to institutional-constitutionally changing the fabric of their respective societies, if on a sub-national scale. In the case of the former, the occupation of unused farmland by landless activists exploits a clause in the post-dictatorship constitution that aims to maximize the economic productivity of Brazil more than it seeks to give title to those who work the soil. In the case of the Zapatistas, their defense of the *ejido* provision in Mexico’s 1917 constitution – Article 17 that allowed for the common ownership of land that was abrogated as a precondition for Mexico’s membership in NAFTA in 1994 – as well as their moves to enact and enforce protections for the country’s poor and indigenous population bespeaks an appreciation for the limited-but-not-insignificant utility of legislative paths to social justice.

This social democratic and Polanyian approach is obviously open to attack from the perspective of fugitive democracy. At their most extreme, proponents of a fugitive constituent democracy see little to differentiate *any* project that relies upon state power. Any use of the state signals constituted power's capture, consumption, and negation of the democracy of the multitude. More humbly, the sort of cautious optimism of the strategists tends to make apologies for the Bolivarian Revolution's failure to delink the economy from dependence oil, or to 'develop endogenously' by 'sowing the oil' – slogans that are also holdovers from the Fourth Republic. Strategists acknowledge that the present moment falls far short of the revolutionary promises of the past, but they point to real world gains in the quality of life for the region's majorities, looking more for a 'permanent revolution' than the frontal assault and swift victory for which contemporary economic, ecological, and human crises would seem to beg.¹⁶⁴

As such, fugitive democracy's refusal to engage in actually existing institutions might at best be judged a shortsightedness and at worst as irresponsible and counter-productive maximalism. Rome was not built in a day, and revolutionary events do not emerge from nowhere. Nor, from this perspective, can constituent power leave a latent, potential, and ultimately ineffectual stage of its development. Particularly at a

¹⁶⁴ On the question of permanent revolution in Venezuela, Steve Ellner (2011) concludes that while such a description for the Bolivarian process might be tempting, given that as of 2011 Chávez retained office for over a decade, and "in spite of the *Chavista* strategy of taking advantage of victories by immediately deepening the process of change, the *Chavistas* have stopped short of the accelerated pace advocated by Trotskyists. Furthermore, the *Chavista* leadership has been characterized by eclecticism more than adherence to dogmatic formulas" (253).

moment in which the pink tide can be seen as either ebbing or facing new challenges, the strategic approach contends that we must guard against the danger of inadvertently supporting the powers of reaction in the name of a contrived, abstract revolutionary purity.

How then, to advance dialectically from this seeming impasse? Better, *can* we advance dialectically from this impasse, and *do we want to*? One might argue that projects in *autogestión* (self-management) represent pockets of autonomy that exceed both the commandeering capacities of constituted power *as well as* the analytical usefulness of the constituent-constituted binary. In this line of thought, the Chávez administration has been forced ‘leftward’ by factory occupations and militant social activism in the ever-growing slums of Venezuela (on the former, see Azzellini 2009; on the latter, Ellner 2008). *Autogestión* in Venezuela might thus be seen as amounting to an iterated string of explosions of constituent power, enabled by yet not completely or complacently tied to a state power.

However, there is little that is unique or interesting to suggesting that moments of ungovernability – with all their risk and potential – persist in Venezuela, save perhaps for the fact that the Chávez government has been more responsive than others to the latent and expressed demands of these eruptions. From this can we conclude that the Bolivarian Revolution is writing a new social contract? A reconfiguration of the dialectic between constituent and constituted power? A flattening and identification of these terms? A new mode of governability all together or a new practice of creative ungovernability freed from its defining constraints?

This chapter began by considering the current ‘pink tide’ of left-of-center governments in Latin America as a direct reaction to the neoliberal restructuring in the region of the 1980s and 1990s. This position entailed the assertion that neoliberalism was somehow ‘over’ and the trajectory and degree of radicalness of present reactions can be predicted at least in part by what structural adjustment wrought in a given society. Thus, neoliberalism can be seen in many ways as extending beyond the immediate details and consequences of specific economic policies. It created an entire social apparatus, a *habitus*, in the language of Pierre Bourdieu. I also argued that this neoliberal *habitus* was only retroactively identifiable, as witnessed in the deployment of the phrase ‘la cuarta república’ to encapsulate the urban architecture, social inequality, and moral values of neoliberalism.

However, this in turn opened up another area in need of investigation, in that the actual, historical *cuarta república* predates but includes neoliberal restructuring. In this way we can thus locate a symptom of how post-neoliberal, Bolivarian, Venezuela thinks of itself. By conflating the fourth republic and neoliberalism the Bolivarian Revolution attempts to underline its antagonism to capitalism *tout court*, differentiating itself from other ‘pink tide’ moments in word if not necessarily by deed. This gesture by the Bolivarian Revolution also carries with it the implication that neoliberalism should not be considered a distinct phase or epoch, but is rather as John Beverly suggested a ‘restoration’ or extension of a project that was in place long before the Washington Consensus became an issue around which to organize. And herein – perhaps – lay its potentially multitudinous seed. While the Bolivarian Revolution is at

least identifiably *only* anti-*neoliberal*, it recognizes neoliberalism as part of a deeper underlying social structure every time it references *la cuarta república*. It thus invites a reading and a subjectivization extending beyond Polanyi's virtuous competition between society and the market. Or better: the government has been forced to acknowledge this reality by the multitudinous and fugitive forms taken by constituent power in Venezuela.

I then moved into the type of social organization neoliberalism posits, considering it both in terms of political economy as well as social ontology. While neoliberalism must be understood as extending rather than replacing classical liberalism's emphasis of the individual over the collective and the contract over the social, the way in which it made these attributes obvious made it impossible to reproduce the fiction of social peace – especially in Venezuela. Neoliberalism dismissed any conceptualization of a participatory democracy or a world organized by nonliberal principles as either impractical or 'ideological' and totalitarian. It thus attempted to reinforce a *habitus* in which, economically and socially, the entire world was potentially- or becoming-capital, and politically, the entire world was safe for and organized by capital.

As a result, a number of questions, contentions, and collective forms of being were taken off the proverbial table. I discussed this in terms of the 'post-democratic' and 'post-political' challenges of neoliberalism and its aftermaths. These 'posts' allow us to appreciate, I argued, the degree to which neoliberalism should be considered as the vanguard of its day in constituted power's battle to contain constituent power.

They also forced a consideration of the relation between democracy, state power, and social change. In this conclusion I have elaborated these dynamics via a discussion of ‘fugitive’ and ‘strategic’ organizations of democracy, suggesting they might not be as mutually exclusive as they often project.

What then of post-politics and post-post-politics in the aftermath of neoliberalism? Does the negation of the negation leave us with a ‘return’ of ‘the political’? Does the ‘end’ of the ‘end of history’ mean we have returned to a world context of the struggle between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots,’ of the ideological struggle between the values of market competition and the good of the common? While avoiding such simplifications and also avoiding the deconstructionist temptation gesture empty to an ‘other’ form of life ‘to come’ I would like to suggest that the Bolivarian experience in post-neoliberal Venezuela highlights the extent to which these ‘post’ formations only ever served as support mechanisms of the lifeworld and subject-positions needed for capital accumulation in the 1980s and 1990s. They were in other words instances of constituted power’s never-ending need to find and expose constituent power wherever it manifests. The degree to which the Bolivarian Revolution breaks with this dynamic of the (Creole) Republic will be determined by the force of the multitude, just as the multitude determined and forced an end to the social order desired by neoliberalism.

Conclusion

At its most fundamental, this dissertation examined the relation between subjects and states. I contended that this relation is one of mutual constitution, and that the co-constitutive nature of social relations is itself determined by the specific limits and possibilities of a given conjuncture. Paraphrasing Marx, we make each other, but not with materials of our own choosing. Put in terms explicitly tied to Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution, the government of Hugo Chávez was made possible by the social upheavals of the 1990s. Its political trajectory, as well as the discursive and social imaginary in which it has operated, is largely determined by 'los sucesos del '89' (the events of that '89). These upheavals were at the time directed by networks of autonomous social forces that cannot be explained solely by their class, race, or geographic locations. Their power was amorphous, destructive, and both materially and psychologically intensely creative. They were, as I have described throughout this dissertation, of multitudinous potential. The energies of this multitude were directed not at winning and exercising state power but rather – especially in the case of the *caracazo* of 1989 – of breaking with the state-citizen relation itself. *Or at least against the state-citizen relation as it had come to be defined in twentieth century Venezuela.* This has thus been a dissertation about the co-constitution of states and social bodies and how this relation is defined by moments in which the latter breaks with the former.

Since the election of Chávez in 1998 – after a campaign that promised to erase the old order, rewrite the constitution, and refound the Republic of Venezuela

on 'Bolivarian' grounds – the government and these multitudinous bodies have been engaged in a tense dialectic whereby each attempts to define and direct the other. By the time the social substance of this dialectic were established (after the opposition thoroughly discredited itself in the lockout of the oil industry in 2003) the structural context of change in Venezuela was definitively anti-neoliberal. Neoliberalism was seen to have triggered the social upheavals of the 1980s and 1990s. Neoliberalism was equated with inequality, poverty, and an international second-tier status as primary-product exporting 'petrostate.'

That Venezuela was characterized by these conditions both domestically and in its position in the international state system long before Carlos Andrés Pérez's *paquetazo* of February 1989 is of little matter. In the years separating the *caracazo* of February 1989 and the election of Hugo Chávez in 1998, and in numerous public ceremonies and official utterances since, neoliberalism has been identified symbolically with more than the sum of its parts. Neoliberalism came to mean more than the economic policies of the Washington Consensus. The protests against it that grew in number and size throughout the 1990s similarly pushed beyond the corrective and in to the territory of ungovernability. That is to say, protest was animated not by discontent with what was seen as a reaction to the bad or excessive acts of a few bad men who had just happened to take control of an otherwise structurally sound order. Protest in the wake of the *caracazo* was instead animated by a position that maintained necessary changes could not be carried out in conditions of late twentieth century representative liberal democracy.

This dissertation tracks attempts on the part of the Bolivarian Revolution (1999-present) to capture, define, and determine these autonomous social forces in its project to build a still undefined ‘socialism for the twenty first century.’ I contended the contemporary Venezuelan state survives pressures from the both the internal opposition and international forces only to the extent that it harnesses (or better, only to the extent it is able to catch up to) the creative, immanent, and ‘constituent’ power of the populations it claims as its own.

I have argued that the successes of the Bolivarian Revolution in forging more inclusive, participatory, and egalitarian democratic forms have come not from a structured exchange (such as voting in regularly scheduled elections), but rather from moments in which autonomous social forces have exceeded the limits established by official discourse. This dissertation thus focused on moments in which the government fails to control the multitude. However, I also contended that this need not be seen as a wholly cynical maneuver on the part of the Chávez government, and moments in which it breaks with representative, liberal democracy do not betray a hidden authoritarian agenda.

To the extent that the Bolivarian Revolution has been able to produce a ‘government of ungovernability’ it has lived up to its pretensions *as a revolution* by not only recognizing powers outside of its control but of obeying them. *Mandar Obediendo*. As such, the government of Hugo Chávez can be minimally if often inconsistently characterized as post-liberal as well as post-neoliberal. Building on fieldwork with activists who situated themselves at the border of bureaucracy and radical activism as

well as with ‘anti-Chavista’ middle class Venezuelans, I argued that the Bolivarian project demands a reading of ‘postliberal regimes’ attuned to its experimentation with more inclusive, participatory, and substantive forms of democracy. However, as it remains in an experimental phase, its progress in this regard – and hence the ultimate definition of ‘twenty first century socialism’ – remains largely unsettled.

The government of Hugo Chávez claims to embody a revolutionary transformation and leveling of the relation between constituent and constituted power. I argue, however, that as important as official or governmental support may be, the innovations of the Bolivarian Revolution cannot be reduced to institutional design or presidential rhetoric. I focus instead on the social reproduction of individual and collective subjectivities and how autonomous social forces from the margins of Venezuelan society have, since the 1980s, increasingly demanded a quicker pace for political change. Bolivarian *habitus* challenges the naturalization of market rule and enacts a sweeping and ruthless *détournement* of long-held myths once central to Venezuela’s ‘social peace.’ This dissertation thus in many ways has itself reflected the uneasy and open dialectic taking place in Venezuela today between social forces and state power: I have had to engage directly with the government of Hugo Chávez while tracking gestures that exceed its control or ability to characterize the constellation of forces that drive Venezuela today.

The work of this dissertation on social forces and contemporary Venezuela carries with it a number of potential applications and insights for other parts of the

world. Before outlining some of these contributions, however, I will give a more detailed recounting of how this dissertation developed.

In the first chapter, 'Between Multitude and Pueblo,' I tracked the discursive attempts to characterize – and in many cases, to capture – the constituent power of the multitude in contemporary Venezuela. I drew on the official discourse of the Chávez government to trace ways in which it has identified itself with the cause and substance of the ungovernable. This of course immediately raises a paradox in that we here have a case of a government – a constituted power of order, institution, and stability – with the free-flowing, democratic, and contingent energies of highly contestatory social forces. In other words, this is a case of the state claiming it represents both the demands as well as the ontological substance of forces seeking to dismantle state power itself.

Here we see a convergence of the Bolivarian Revolution with modern liberalism, and in particular with the social contract and the republican form of democratic government. The states emerging from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century anti-colonial and anti-feudal revolts in the North Atlantic and South America all quite proudly proclaim their revolutionary origins – even as they work actively as forces of global reaction in the present. Indeed, into the present the so-called 'right to revolt' underwrites the contractual claims of legitimacy of all democratic regimes, if only in the unreachable 'final instance.' Modern liberal governance is seen as an exchange and a contract – whether in the hyper-

individualized and largely Lockean North or in Southern democracies with a greater emphasis on the general will.

It is with this in mind that much analysis on the distinction between constituent and constituted powers is framed. Constituent power breaks old orders and founds new regimes. Constituted power maintains them by freezing or at best sacralizing constituent power. In this chapter I drew in particular on the thought of Antonio Negri and Enrique Dussel to track this relation between powers through the conversions of multitudes into pueblos. In everyday language this might mean something along the lines of mobs versus peoples, of riotous and uncontrollable force against stable identity as an ontological ground. Without completely negating this understanding, my approach to the dynamic has more to do with the relation to structure depicted by each. Negri's understanding of the multitude and Dussel's theorization of the pueblo share a basis in an unjust or unpractical exteriority to a given socio-political order. They also share a critique of capitalism as a parasitic drain on the living labor (or constituent power) of their respective theoretical objects.

However, whereas Negri's is a thought based in an expansive and uncompromising monism, Dussel contends that mediations are not only necessary in the sense of being inevitable and present but *good* insofar as they enhance and realize the potential of an otherwise inchoate constituent power. This realization is never fundamentally complete. For Dussel, constituted power is equally a necessary element in the struggle of the pueblo to free itself from oppression *and* prone to entropy and fetishization. Institutions are powerful tools, but they are in perpetual need of revision

and adaptation; this reforming power can only come from the *pueblo*, or from the elements marginalized by a given social order.

The resulting understanding of politics is for Dussel something along the lines of a ‘permanent revolution.’ Negri’s theorization of the multitude seeks to break from this back-and-forth. Rather than relegating the explosive energy of the multitude to the exceptional birth and death of regimes he contends that constituent power can initiate a line of flight that remains perpetually open, democratic, and active. The multitude thus resists any rationalization, friendly or antagonistic.

In contemporary Venezuela this dynamic can be seen in official discourse’s characterization of some recent ‘explosions’ of constituent power. The *caracazo* of 1989, the 2002 counter-coup that returned Chávez to power, and the 2003 defeat of a bosses’ strike in the oil industry were all moments in which autonomous forces mobilized against a prevailing order. Each of these instances have been recorded in the official history of the Bolivarian Revolution as either its precursors or evidence of its correspondence with or realization of the ‘will of the people.’ However, as I argue in the chapter, these characterizations are always necessarily incomplete, and something resembling a ‘multitudinous democracy’ reminds and insists upon. The Bolivarian Revolution claims to reflect the will of the multitude, to transform it into something of a Dusselian *pueblo*, to allow it to rule itself. This ‘capture’ of constituent power, however, is not based on an exchange, nor is it premised on pre-existing individual and collective subjectivities. It is rather a relation that persists in the ‘gap’ between constituent and constituted power. More importantly, this gap is kept open

by the perpetual motion of the multitude as it pushes against the definitions and relations of the present.

In the second chapter, “The Problem with Populism,” I move to another technology by which constituent power is captured by constituted power. I analyze populism from two different perspectives in this and the following chapter. In Chapter Two I study populism as a concept within the political and social sciences that seeks to translate phenomena from one part of the world into the epistemological universe of another. In the third chapter I move to an analysis of recent attempts by self-identified leftist scholars to construct a liberatory and democratic political practice suited to contemporary post-War, neoliberal, and then post-neoliberal conditions. In each case I argue that populism fails to accurately characterize the Bolivarian project in Venezuela and in fact tells us more about the anxieties of the authors vis-à-vis constituent power than it does about the phenomena themselves.

In considering the way in which social science writing dismisses contemporary Venezuela as ‘populist’ it is also important to consider the geopolitical role the North American university has played, particularly in terms of producing information about places like Venezuela. During the Cold War, Area Studies programs were tasked with deciphering Latin America in order to help the United States and its allies maintain indirect political and economic control in the region. This corresponded neatly with a longer-established dynamic in the region that continues to the present, globalized and neoliberal world economy. In this dynamic, I contend that ‘populism’ serves as a watchword that helps regulate a global division of legitimacy that determines which

states should be considered models of development and progress and which are pathologized and rendered in need of observation, regulation, and reformation by any number of means.

‘Populism’ diagnoses a ‘less than democratic’ form of democracy. Critics of the Chávez regime cannot deny its formal, electorally democratic credentials. There have been more elections in Venezuela since Chávez’s first taking office than in any other comparable time period in Venezuela, extending from contests for the presidency to neighborhood-level organizations and labor unions. Indeed, before the first primary for regional and state level PSUV candidates in the lead up to the 2008 elections contenders for office were selected by unaccountable elites rather than popular vote. In their critique of the Bolivarian Revolution, the social scientists thus get something right: democracy is not simply a matter of regularly scheduled elections. However, if we take democracy to mean a mode of social organization that seeks to realize constituent power, we can actually see that social science writing on the Bolivarian Revolution – and in particular, its concern with institutional design – is often animated by an anxiety of the ungovernable powers it claims to work with and through.

From this critique of social science writing as a conservative force in relation to the objects of its inquiry I move to a larger picture critique of deeper colonial the relation between knowledge production and Venezuela. Drawing on the work of the coloniality/modernity perspective I contend that this fear of the multitude and defense of constituted power in academia can be traced to deeper racialized power

structures that form the core of the modern/colonial capitalist world system. In much the same way as Cold War era developmentalism and modernization theory depicted South American countries as perpetually following the example of and in need of the tutelage of ‘developed’ countries, so too today does writing on populism relegate the Bolivarian Revolution as geographically, economically, politically, and civilizationally inferior to the global North. To therefore dismiss the Bolivarian Revolution as populist not only misses what is unique and uniquely possible in Venezuela today, it also reinforces a global order of political legitimacy whereby liberal representative democracies are considered ‘normal’ and all other regimes pathologized objects of concern.

The third chapter examines attempts to reclaim populism for some sort of radical or liberatory politics. This chapter, “The Power of the Many,” contends that positive theorizations of populism tend to see politics as the moment in which a previously excluded group is incorporated into the political and symbolic order of a given society. However, just because populist phenomena signal an inclusion or representation of the needs and demands of the many within a political order that once excluded them does not necessarily atone for the injustices of the present. Nor does it obviate the ethical limits of representation and assimilation within contemporary liberal democratic regimes. In fact, I argued that this inclusion actually strengthens the assumed totality of this ‘society’ and further entrenches a vertical and domineering relation between constituted and constituent power. It thus matters little if we consider populism as, drawing from the examples considered in this chapter, an

affair having to do with ‘the political,’ with democracy, or with the semiotic constitution of reality itself. The matter revolves instead on the question of directionality and force: is the relation between constituent and constituted power one where the former flows into and forms the latter, or one in which institutions attempt to cement, freeze, and deploy the energies of the many?

Taken as a whole, this chapter and its immediate predecessor offer a complicated view on a term often used to describe the Bolivarian Revolution. I have argued *both* that populism should not be seen as a threat to modern liberal democracies (in the previous chapter) *and* that this is precisely its greatest shortcoming. In each of these chapters, though they treated significantly differing disciplinary approaches to the matter, the critique of populism (or the critique of the critique of populism) has been animated by an ethical demand that the power of the multitude not be alienated or denied.

I have contended that the resulting contribution to political thought approaches question of social ontology not in search for a rationally ordered and wholistic nation with coherent, articulated demands, nor for the reasonable give and take of interests and demands envisioned by democratic agonism. I argue instead that the power of the many demands an end to any world order that apologizes for the crimes of poverty and exclusion. It does so, furthermore, in terms that are absolute, even if they are usually felt more than they are articulated. As such, they cannot be relegated to the status of empty signifiers unless they have already been captured, translated, and domesticated. This is ultimately one of the biggest problems with

populism-as-a-‘revolutionary’ phenomena: it replaces the particularity of struggles and the positions therein with an abstract and universal ‘logic.’ It in other words acts to shore up a limit to how (constituted) power can operate by rendering any challenge to contemporary societies as uniformly weighted and equivalent ‘data’ or details against the backdrop of a *fundamental* structure.

The first three chapters address questions of social ontology in terms of the multitude’s resistance to translation and capture by constituted power. Chapters four and five move more into the structural conditions in which these processes take place and by which they are in part determined. Chapter Four, ‘The Discursive Production of a Revolution,’ traces the combination and détournement of long-standing social myths in Venezuela – Bolívar, state-lead development, and oil – into contemporary *Bolivarianismo*. Chapter Five moves into an analysis of neoliberalism and its aftermaths in Venezuela and Latin America more generally at the level of subject formation and social change.

Chapter Four engages directly with Bolivarianismo as a practice and an emerging ideological formation. I contend that Bolivarianismo is better considered as a suturing of well-established discourses and myths that predate the actions of the current government (and the socialities associated with it) for generations. Put differently, this chapter examines the myths that combine and relate with one another in the social milieu of contemporary *Bolivarianismo*.

I argue that *Bolivarianismo* is not an empty signifier because its malleability is limited – it draws from national symbols and betrays a class content that can be

turned in one direction or the other, but which always betrays the limitations and class imagination of the Creole republic. The implied question – can *bolivarianismo* press beyond itself or is its horizon always to be dominated by the modern nation state – also forms the challenge of thinking through how individual and collective subjects are formed in the present conjuncture. Put differently, if Bolivarianismo can become multitudinous, to what extent does this come about as an exception, and to what extent can the ruptures enabled – but by no means produced – by *Bolivarianismo* open space for new revolutionary sequences within the self-proclaimed Bolivarian revolution of Hugo Chávez?

The key criteria on which solutions to this question can be determined, I argue, hinges on the degree to which the ideological and discursive structures of the Bolivarian Revolution feed antagonism or to which they enforce a sort of artificial social cohesion. That is to say, empty signifiers operate not only as affective and discursive vessels into which differential demands of distinct social subjectivities invest their energies, they also form the social link that translates these distinct bodies into amalgamated identities. Thus, despite the fact that the empty signifier is often deployed as a distinguishing frontier between opposing social blocs, it usually also carries two homogenizing functions that ultimately dilute the intensity of class struggle. The first has to do with the way in which – in the case of populism – the empty signifier is rooted in and guarantees a shared national or ethnic identity. ‘The people’ or ‘the popular’ exist within a presumed unity they share (perhaps grudgingly) with an enemy. The second function, closely related to the first, rests in populism’s

procedure that aims to purify that unity of the opposing element. The internal antagonism within the imagined community of the nation thus reinforces the power and status of that imagined community in that the discursive battle of populism presumes, projects, and fights for the right to define and protect that very body.

In this way, the empty signifier operates to capture the constituent power of the multitude by orienting its antagonism in support of the national cause. By contrast, I contend that myths become multitudinous when they seek not to control and direct constituent power but rather to enhance and expand its scope, potential, and realization. Put in explicitly Spinozist terms myths become multitudinous when they reflect the power of the many back on itself in such a way that this reflection becomes more propulsion forward than affirmation of a static identity or position.

This is how, I argued, the antagonism of revolutionary myth breaks with the notion of myth as false consciousness or as empty signifier. Myth operates in this sense by projecting a challenge and spurring action. The multitudinous antagonism it inspires aims not to purify the nation, but to push beyond constraint and exclusion. In Bolivarian Venezuela, the recoding of long-standing myths thus serves the dual function of exposing the political, racial, gendered, and classed elements of previous regimes of symbolic group subjectivization while at the same time laying the ground work for a new insurrectionary voluntarism and heroism. The target here is not simply to build a 'gran Venezuela' as was the case in previous regimes. It is rather to build a 'Socialism for the Twenty First Century.' That is to say, it extends beyond

national borders or identities and their established and corporatist organization of the social whole.

This discursive structure provides the raw materials of shared memory and symbolic capital that, I have argued, can and have either ‘become multitudinous’ or serve to recollect the ungovernable energies at the base of the Bolivarian process. However, this is not by any means sufficient terrain for explaining either the conditions of possibility for the Bolivarian Revolution, its unfolding (either since the *caracazo* of 1989 or the election of Chávez in 1998), or its future. Nor do solely discursive or ‘culturalist’ accounts offer sufficient accounts of what the Bolivarian Revolution has to offer other by way of example or lesson to other movements in Latin America or throughout the world. Without an explanation of the political economy of the ‘lost decades’ and the early twenty first century any account of the present risks reinforcing the ‘Venezuelan exceptionalism’ thesis that seeks to isolate the process’s potential impacts. I turn to this task in the fifth and final chapter of this dissertation, “...after Neoliberalism?.”

Chapter Five contends that the Bolivarian Revolution would not be possible if it were not for the resistance mounted against the neoliberal restructuring of the economy. This resistance of course had its most dramatic first expression with the *caracazo* of 1989. In subsequent years, anti-systemic actions took on greater scope, participation, and impact. The chapter highlights the reforms and prerogatives of neoliberalism in Venezuela and throughout the region (the so-called ‘Washington Consensus’), and contends that neoliberalism also formed a *habitus* that naturalized a

scale of inequality that allowed a few to prosper while others – both bodies and entire regions or lifeworlds of infrastructure and national social welfare – were rendered expendable.

There is a growing consensus that Venezuela and Latin America are certainly more post-neoliberal than they are post-capitalist. This chapter investigates this contention through a study of contemporary Latin American neostructuralist political economy, the policies of governments in Venezuela and Chile, and an emphasis on how neoliberalism operated through the very production of being itself in the region. That is to say (on this latter concern), neoliberalism naturalized a particular set of values, spaces, and bodies, and set the very limits by which the world could be perceived. As such, any attempt to construct a ‘post-neoliberal’ moment in Venezuela (or anywhere else for that matter) must be judged on the degree to which it has constructed an antineoliberal *habitus*.

This construction differs from Laclau’s hegemony theory, even though both *habitus* and hegemony circulate around the notion of ‘common sense.’ The difference, however, is that for Laclau this operation takes place through the investment of affect into an empty signifier. It is thus in many ways a tactical operation that has little to do with substance but is rather concerned with perception. The *habitus* of which I am speaking runs against its usual conceptualization as a conservative force. While recognizing that habit can and often does constrain change I also argue that multitudinous change is also inculcated in habit, in the transformation of quotidian practices and perceptions such that, in the case of Venezuela, *one simply cannot any longer*

openly declare themselves in favor of neoliberal economics. This is why the opposition's strategy has been increasingly to campaign on issues such as insecurity while promising to continue the Chávez government's social programs. Or, as we saw during the 2012 primaries, they have been forced to clumsily 'popularize' the free market.

While this move on the part of opposition politicians is perhaps obviously a cynical bit of electioneering, it nonetheless registers that something beyond Chávez and beyond Chávez's control has changed in Venezuela. I argue that part of the world created by neoliberalism throughout the region was the enforced foreclosure of politics – both in terms of the replacement of contestation, antagonism, and competing visions for a rule by (usually US or UK trained) technocrats and experts, as well as the assertion that history had somehow 'ended' and that there could be no more 'alternative' to the market's domination over public life. What is perhaps most striking about this position – widely touted both at the time and in retrospect – was its utter one-sidedness. Constituted power sought to divorce itself from constituent power by contending its legitimacy was based not with the consent of the governed but rather with its performance on various scales of economic 'progress.'

Two responding conclusions can be drawn from such an assertion. The first is that the state, having broken its side of the social contract, triggered a reaction on the side of the pueblo, its ostensible partner in the modern nation-state. This is the argument of a significant portion of the government of Hugo Chávez. From this light, explosions of constituent power – emergences of the multitude – are little more than

civic exercises or moments of what Dussel calls the *hiperpotencia* of the *pueblo*. The *pueblo* revolts against the bad government. The people want the end of the regime.

There is of course much truth in this reading of the relation between constituent and constituted power. In Chapter Five's conclusion this reasoning rests behind what I described as a 'strategic' understanding of the state, power, and post-neoliberalism in Latin America today. This position contends – even while admitting there is more work to be done – that the present relation between constituent and constituted power must be stabilized and institutionalized.

A second position, which conceives links constituent power to democracy, and the practice of democracy in its truest sense as an exceptional occurrence within the context of the modern liberal republic, argues that constituent power can never be 'shored up' in the practice or institution of constituted power. Indeed, this 'fugitive' position contends these expressions of force are mutually exclusive. From this point of view, the 'explosions' or *razos* in Venezuela and throughout the region and world should not just be seen as refusals of neoliberal restructuring but as rejections of the modern social contract *tout court*. From this perspective, the power of the state was never about consent in the first place. Indeed, here entire notion of consent, contract, and exchange were means of first recognizing constituent power and second alienating it from the multitude by offering a false avenue to its realization via ballots and managed participation in the institutional mechanisms of the Creole Republic.

The aftermath of neoliberalism in Venezuela and Latin America thus pushes past the immediate conjuncture of global financial turmoil and a realignment of geopolitical relations. It addresses something much more fundamental in the capitalist world system and indeed, to the ways in which we cohabit the world. More than a question of capitalism and socialism, the Bolivarian Revolution allows us to rethink the very fundamentals of the modern liberal nation state and what we have come to understand as the republican form of government.

One of the problems inherent in thinking and writing about constituent power and the multitude the fact that these categories resist all attempts at definition and stability is perhaps the most frustrating in that each points to a fundamental ambiguity at the heart of social and political life. Constituent power can destroy regimes as easily as it thwarts our attempts to comprehend, define, or categorize it. This does not mean that any attempt to recognize or enhance constituent power's relative freedom from the constituted power of the modern capitalist nation-state will inevitably be an exercise in failure. It only means, rather, that it will be an ongoing, open, and contingent endeavor.

In this dissertation I have argued that Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution has been occasioned by a reconfiguration in a balance of powers considered by modern liberal political theory to usually be contained in the nation-state and the social contract. It was this shift in the dynamic between constituent and constituted power that made the election of Hugo Chávez possible, not the reverse. I have also argued that one of the ways in which this shift in relations has been visible has been in the

experimentation with new, more direct, participatory, decentralized, and protagonistic democracies. This has been the case particularly in the shifting dynamic between the state, the market, and the multitude. However, this is not the only place such a realignment can be observed. I have also illustrated ways in which the imagined community of Venezuela has been symbolically rewritten to exceed the boundaries originally set by nineteenth and twentieth century nationalisms. In each of these structural and subjectivizing modes I have outlined ways in which technologies of constituted power have attempted to claim constituent power as their own. While the Bolivarian Revolution has gone far in realigning the classical liberal dynamic between these poles of political authority, force, and legitimacy, there nonetheless remains a persistent truth: Constituted power needs constituent power. The reverse does not hold true.

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