POSTFACE: APRIL 13TH 2002

Somos expresión de la multitud. [. . .]

[Desmitificar] la tecnología como un saber oscuro destinado sólo a especialistas y la producción de información como un coto cerrado de "profesionales"
[. . .] nos conduce a la promoción de un nuevo modelo de comunicación social, en el cual la comunicación deje de ser usada como mercancía y vuelva a convertirse en la humana facultad de intercambiarse afectos, deseos, conocimientos. Una comunicación que sea expresión de la multitud, de la diversidad, de la libertad.


a coup foretold

Venezuela's April 2002 coup lasted only two days before what would seem to be the restoration of the previous regime. But the overthrow and then precipitate reinstatement of President Hugo Chávez revealed the role and finally the bankruptcy of the televisual media in neoliberalism and neopopulism. The coup marked the limit of a regime of visibility and representability; in the counter-coup, the multitude emerged unheralded, but undisguised.

The coup itself could not have been more clearly signalled. During March and early April, constant news coverage of the gathering crisis gripped Caracas. Support for Chávez's once overwhelmingly popular regime was declining, in part thanks to a relentless assault by the
press and the television networks, which openly opposed Chávez and happily gave space to his opponents. Only the one state-owned TV channel was unashamedly pro-government. Chávez took to decreeing *cadenas* or "chains," in which he obliged the networks to broadcast his long addresses to the nation. One set of televisual discourses fought another.

Television had been instrumental in the former army colonel's success: he came to prominence when, following his own 1992 failed coup attempt, he demanded airtime as condition of surrender, broadcasting a memorably qualified admission of defeat "for the moment." After his 1998 election victory, Chávez's folksy and humorous televised appearances, his weekly radio call-in show "Aló Presidente," and his TV show "De Frente con el Presidente," became cornerstones of his neopopulist appeal. Now, however, the commercial media only redoubled their opposition, subverting the *cadenas* by superimposing text protesting this "abuse" of media freedom, or splitting the screen between Chávez's speech and images of anti-government demonstrations. The struggle for dominance was incarnated in split screen TV.

The trigger for the coup was a battle for control of Venezuela's oil. In February, Chávez had sacked the president and the majority of the directors of the state oil company, PDVSA (the world's largest oil company and Latin America's largest company of any kind). The management
responded with a production slowdown and then a strike; in turn, Chávez fired nineteen managers. The country was polarized: Chávez opponents organized cacerolazos (banging pots and pans) timed with the president's cadenas, and massed in street demonstrations outside PDVSA's headquarters; his supporters gathered in televised rallies outside the presidential palace. In early April, the opposition called a general strike; on April 10th, it became indefinite. An opposition march was announced for the morning of Thursday 11th; the commercial stations endlessly advertized the event. On the day itself, 200,000 demonstrators continued beyond their stated destination, heading for downtown and the core of the president's power base. The confrontation was about to become physical.

The regime's final moments began as the president tried to take over the television networks literally as well as symbolically. Around 1:30pm, a cadena was announced and Chávez appeared on the airwaves, broadcasting from his office, downplaying any disturbance. As he talked, one by one the terrestrial channels were taken off the air, leaving only the government station. A surreal dialogue ensued: the private channels (now visible only to cable subscribers) split their screens once more, showing mute and confused images of rioting outside the palace, commenting on these events with superimposed text, while Chávez responded to the
images and text added by the TV stations to the official discourse.

Then the chain broke and the game was up. The networks abandoned Chávez and dedicated themselves to the pictures (often repeated, out of synch) of events downtown while the president dominated the airwaves: confused and disorganized images of stone-throwing youths; the injured on stretchers; Chávez loyalists apparently returning fire; bodies. Troops and tanks mobilizing, and military communiqués, marked a coup in progress. As the night wore on, state television screened old nature documentaries, and then went off the air while the private channels regained their full broadcasting capabilities. A narrative emerged: Chávez had ordered police to fire on the demonstrators; sharpshooters had killed innocent civilians. But the images never entirely added up. Eventually the military high command came out against the president and, at 1:30am, the sound of pots and pans and fireworks greeted the news that Chávez was in custody. Pedro Carmona, a career businessman, appeared on television as the new president.

Twelve hours later, the previous day's choppy and incoherent images had been played over and over, now settling if only by virtue of their ordered repetition into the linear, coherent story provided by the newspapers. The glimpses of men shooting pistols from a bridge, their guns
circled and digitally enhanced, were given context by the diagrams and first-hand accounts provided by print journalists. The morning of Saturday 13th, front-page headlines declared "A Step in the Right Direction." Luis Duno analyzes at length the ways in which, during this interregnum "a certain type of collectivity--understood as mob, horde, rabble, and lumpen--was displaced by the concert of politically acceptable, democratic, categorizing rationalities" ("Las tropelías de la turba" 6). President Carmona had been sworn in and named members of his "transitional" government, whose first new policies were announced. All traces of the previous regime were to be erased. Even the country's name changed: from the 1999 Constitution's "Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela" to, once more, simply "The Republic of Venezuela."

a multitude arises

Elsewhere, however, another story was afoot, news fragments circulating by word of mouth or cell phone. Rumors spread of disturbances in the streets; of a parachute regiment and a section of the air force rebelling; or even of an imminent state of siege. At the site of Thursday's confrontation, barricades improvised from piles of rubbish or burning tires marked out the territory around the national palace. As if from nowhere, ragged processions were advancing on downtown,
converging on the national palace, chanting pro-Chávez slogans and carrying portraits of the deposed president. They distributed amateurish flyers. Other chavistas commandeered buses, calling on passers-by to join this unexpected protest.

Some radio reports told of the crowds on the streets, but mainly there were official pronouncements. Incipient splits could be inferred among the forces behind the ruling junta. President Carmona declared that the situation was under control, downplayed any insubordination among the armed forces, but announced he might fire some of the high command. The pact between military and commerce was quietly unravelling. But the Venezuelan commercial TV stations continued with normal programming--soap operas, imported US sitcoms, game shows. The state-owned channel was still off the air. Only on cable, from BBC World and CNN en español, did reports arrive of disturbances in Caracas's working-class neighborhoods that morning, and of the parachute regiment's refusal to surrender arms. The BBC spoke of thousands outside the palace. Darkness fell, and still no word from the networks. The self-censorship of soap operas and light entertainment blocked any acknowledgement of what was slowly emerging as a pro-Chávez multitude.

Then a development: abruptly one channel broke from its regular programming to show scenes of the street outside its
own headquarters. A group of young and mobile demonstrators, on motorcycles and scooters, were agitating outside the plate glass windows. Rocks were thrown, some windows cracked and graffiti sprayed, and a new chain was formed as all the networks switched to the same image of demonstrators "attacking" the building. But the group moved on and the soap operas resumed. Until a similar group turned up at another channel's headquarters, then another, and another. No more stones, but the demonstrations could now at least be glimpsed, in fragments, outside the TV stations. The channels split their screens into three, and, as one image turned out to be of the television screen itself, the picture fragmented further still, into an endless regress of distorted images snatched through cracked windows. No camera teams ventured out.

Suddenly, around 10:30pm, the state television station, amazingly, returned to the airwaves. Those who had re-taken the station were improvising, desperately. But they gave a version of the violent end to Thursday's march very different from the narrative the media had put forward to justify the coup: the snipers firing on the crowds had aimed at Chávez supporters (not opposition protesters), who had taken the brunt of the casualties. Moreover, Chávez had not resigned; he was being forcibly detained at a naval base on an island to the north. The current president, Carmona, was
illegitimate head of a *de facto* regime. Thousands of people were on the streets outside the presidential palace demanding Chávez's return. Over the next few hours, technical problems meant that the channel would go on and off the air several times. Repeatedly the channel attempted to show images from inside the presidential palace. Around 1am, amid confusion in the palace, Chávez's vice-president, Diosdado Cabello, was sworn in as president. Venezuela now had three presidents simultaneously—Chávez, Carmona, and Cabello. But the balance of power was shifting. Only one question remained, posed by the thousands at the gates of the presidential palace and still besieging the private television stations: where was Chávez?

And so the apparently unthinkable happened. As the seat of power effectively passed back to those loyal to the deposed regime, shortly before 3am, a helicopter brought Hugo Chávez to the palace, mobbed by thousands of near-delirious supporters. All the television stations were now running the images provided by the state channel without further comment—a new chain had formed, as commercial television lapsed into stunned silence. The president returned to the office from which he had been broadcasting as the coup was unfolding. Now, however, no longer alone, but flanked by his ministers in a crowded room buzzing with excitement.
So the coup d'état was overthrown almost invisibly, at the margins of the media. On April 13th, democracy returned despite a self-imposed media blackout of astonishing proportions. A massive revolt erupted while the country's middle classes watched soap operas and game shows; television networks took notice only in the final moments, and only when compelled to do so. Thereafter television could but bear mute witness to an event almost without precedent, as the coup was brought down less than forty-eight hours after its initial triumph. This process resists representation: in Venezuela, the following day's newspapers simply failed to appear, and rumors still abound (though the recent documentary The Revolution Will Not Be Televised offers a fascinating view from inside the palace). As it was, the pact between military and business that engineered the coup was weak, and could survive only through repression or apathy. But the military were reluctant to go through with the repression, and the coup plotters were surprised to be received not with apathy, but with an extraordinary and near-spontaneous multitudinous insurrection.

The coup's overthrow was a revolt against a televisual regime in which Chávez himself was, at least partly, complicit. Chávez's government depended all too much on the figure of the president himself, at best a maverick, at worst authoritarian, whose personal charisma is already lost on the
middle classes and whose promise of a direct contract through televisual means is now undone. "Chavismo" created the political vacuum that briefly allowed the far right pact of arms and commerce to take control. In the event, however, the multitude came to fill that vacuum. The April 13th insurrection shows Chávez's regime dependent upon (constituted by) that multitude. The president thought he could serve as a substitute, masquerading the multitude's agency as his own. But Chávez himself is far from indispensable. For in the tumultuous forty-eight hours in which the president was detained, "chavismo without Chávez" demonstrated a power all of its own, wrongfooting confused attempts at representation. The counter-coup points towards a politics beyond representation, beyond a set of systematic substitutions of people for politicians. Venezuela's coup, and the revolt that overturned it, mark the end of the illusory contract between people and nation and the possible emergence of the multitude.