[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.

--Asociación Nacional de Medios Comunitarios, Libres y Alternativos (Venezuela), “Somos expresión de la multitud”

The Multitude Breaks the Pact

The fiction of hegemony is more threadbare than ever. The myth of the social contract is over. In place of coercion or consent, both of which depend upon granting transcendence to the state, posthegemony substitutes affect, habit, and an immanent multitude. Politics is biopolitics: in fact, it always has been, but today more clearly than
before neither civil society nor the state are sites of struggle or objects of negotiation. At stake is life itself. One the one hand, increasingly corrupt forces of command and control modulate and intervene directly on the bodies of ordinary men and women. On the other hand, everyday insurgencies of constituent power reveal a multitude that betrays and corrodes constituted power from the inside, overflowing and escaping its bounds. The outcome of this confrontation is uncertain: constituent power may still fold back against itself; the line of flight that escapes may become suicidal; the multitude may turn bad and become monstrous; or perhaps, just perhaps, Exodus may lead to what Negri terms “the time of common freedom.”¹

It is in Latin America that the failure of modernity’s social contract is most evident. And Latin America, too, is the setting for the most promising experiments in common freedom. Veteran activist and critic Tariq Ali claims that “South America is on the march again, offering hope to a world either deep in neo-liberal torpor or suffering daily from the military and economic depredations of the New Order.”² For Ali, “Venezuela and the Bolivarian dream” are at the center of an “axis of hope.”³ He offers a rosy view of what have been called the Latin American “Left Turns” or “pink tide,” in which a series of left-leaning governments have been elected to power in the region: from Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 1998, Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva in Brazil in 2002, and Evo Morales in Bolivia in 2005, to Fernando Lugo in Paraguay in 2008, the left has dominated the continent’s politics. But these electoral victories are at best a symptom, at worst a reaction. They follow an even more surprising series of social protests and multitudinous mobilizations: from the Venezuelan Caracazo of 1989, Mexico’s Zapatista insurgency since 1994, the Argentine crisis of 2001, to the Bolivian gas protests of 2004, Latin America has been shaken by myriad struggles that have ushered in a new era of
political flux. From carnivalesque revolt to neighborhood assemblies, from highway pickets to barter economies, novel forms of collective action have shattered the theater of political representation and marked the emergence of a multitude. In response, the region’s left-wing regimes usher in a “new governability,” more precarious if also more propitious than before.4

The Caracazo was the first of the social ruptures that indicated the end of the social pact and presaged the left turns. It began with an instance of what in 1970s Italy was called self-valorization or autoreduction. As sociologists Eddy Cherki and Michel Wieviorka explain, autoreduction is “the act by which consumers, in the area of consumption, and workers, in the area of production, take it upon themselves to reduce, at a collectively determined level, the price of public services, housing, electricity.”5

Cherki and Wieviorka discuss Turin workers’ refusal to pay increased bus fares in 1974. In almost identical fashion, on the morning of February 27, 1989, commuters in and around Caracas refused to pay the higher prices that transport companies demanded of them in the wake of newly-elected President Carlos Andrés Pérez’s packet of neoliberal reforms. But whereas in Turin, this fare strike was soon “organized . . . by unions which brought their active support and simultaneously imposed a coherent line of struggle,”6 in Venezuela no leaders emerged, no party line was enforced.

Within hours, protest spread across the country and especially all over the capital city in what was an apparently “anarchic movement, without direction, totally spontaneous, in no way preconceived by any subversive organizations.”7 By mid-morning, people had built barricades and started to stop trucks, above all those thought to carry food, and empty them of their merchandise, as well as to loot shops and malls. Outrage was provoked by the discovery that shopkeepers had hoarded goods in
anticipation of imminent price rises. In Caracas, the main squares and highways were blockaded. Cars were set alight. Motorcycle dispatch riders communicated rebellion, spread news, and ferried personnel. A protest against bus fares had turned into a general revolt against neoliberal structural adjustment. Moreover, the riot took on colors of carnival as the police were both powerless to intervene and, in some cases, even sympathized with the movement and helped to ensure that the plunder took place with some order and just distribution between young and old, men and women. What anthropologists Fernando Coronil and Julie Skurski call a “loose organization” emerged as groceries and clothing were taken to those who were unable to participate themselves, and large sides of beef and pork were carved up and shared out. A barter economy flourished and “looting dissolved momentarily money’s ability to regulate collective life.” In the end, an estimated one million people took part in the disturbances, “in effect erasing state control of the street.” That night, even as tanks started to roll in to put down what was by now a full-scale insurrection, 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.

The state was slow to react. The President was traveling, and only half-aware of what was going on, told “that nothing out of the ordinary was happening.” It was not until the afternoon of the following day that a government official even tried to address the nation. When the Minister of the Interior appeared on the television, he was halfway through his appeal for calm when he “was overcome by nervous exhaustion and rendered speechless on camera. Disney cartoons replaced him without explanation.”
The state was quite literally struck dumb by events. It failed to articulate even the thinnest of hegemonic fictions. The social pact was almost completely ruptured. And what tenuous notion of a contract with a benevolent and protective state that might have survived the initial uprising was shattered by the government’s eventual response. For when the state finally moved, it moved with force against its own citizenry. A state of exception was declared, the constitution suspended, freedom of the press curtailed, and a curfew imposed. As Coronil and Skurski observe, the “traditional language of populism” was abruptly abandoned, as it failed to “represent the state” let alone the people. Indeed, Pérez was now a president “without a people.”

The multitude had taken their place. Unable to convert multitude into people, its representational strategies now bankrupt, the state responded only with massive repression. For the next few days, the center of Caracas was a war zone. For at least one reporter, “Caracas was Beirut”: a city at the epicenter of a civil war. As Coronil and Skurski put it, “the government’s armed agencies deployed violence in multiple forms, communicating in practice to the poor the distinct forms of otherness by which they could be encompassed.” Up to 1,000 people were killed. Firefights rang out in the downtown. The military fired artillery rounds almost indiscriminately at tower blocks, seeking out snipers but also in general fear at what might lie within their walls: in the words of another journalist, “behind that silent cement the multitude is hidden. Thousands of eyes observe our movements.”

What was most disquieting and unexpected about the Caracazo was that it broke the peace of what had been South America’s most stable democracy. Venezuela had even been “the ‘center’ of world democracy” as it celebrated a spectacular presidential inauguration, attended by an unprecedented gathering of world leaders from 108
countries, less than a month previously. More generally, for much of the twentieth century the country had avoided the political violence that had blighted so much of Latin America. While nations such as Argentina, Chile, and Brazil were under military rule in the 1970s, Venezuela boomed thanks to its oil wealth and the rising price of crude. It had long been regarded as an “exceptional democracy,” exempt from the conflicts that afflicted the rest of the region; it was put forward as “a model democracy for Latin America.” The country apparently demonstrated the benefits and viability of a formal social pact: in 1958, its major political parties had signed a written accord, the “Pact of Punto Fijo.” They agreed to defend the constitution and to respect electoral results; they established a minimum common program and a promise to share power with electoral rivals; and they incorporated elements of so-called civil society, such as labor unions and professional association. The pact aimed to ensure stability and continuity, and to marginalize more radical forces such as, notably, Venezuela’s Communist Party. It was under the auspices of puntofijismo that, in the subsequent three decades, the country garnered its reputation as democratic paradise, and became known for baseball and beauty queens rather than coups or revolutions. But the Pact of Punto Fijo broke down in the Caracazo. The “fixed point” was overwhelmed first by the tidal surge of an irrepressible multitude, and then by the state’s vicious abandonment of even the pretense of hegemony.

**Habits and Affects**

The trigger for the Caracazo was no more (and no less) than habit. Commuters were accustomed to paying one price for their transport; they protested when they were
suddenly forced to pay another. In response to the shock doctrine of neoliberal reform, sprung on the nation without warning after President Pérez had run for office on a broadly populist platform, the Venezuelan population took violent umbrage. There was something conservative about their response: the uprising was an expression of habitus, as well as of conatus, of an instinct for self-preservation or survival. The impulse to demonstrate also drew on traditional habits. Historian Margarita López Maya emphasizes the continuities between the 1989 rebellion and previous moments of social protest: the 1902 British and German blockade of Venezuela’s ports, for instance, provoked “protests whose protagonists were multitudes whose organization and leadership were unknown.” Further disturbances accompanied the death of the dictator Juan Vicente Gómez in 1935, in response to which General José López Contreras, Gómez’s successor, “regarding the multitude, . . . moved in clear pursuit of winning the people to his side.” But unrest continued through to 1936, leading to the growth of “political organizations that would seek in the following years to channel the force lodged in these multitudes towards more stable and fluid forms of communication, so that they could dialogue with power.”

Slowly, López Contreras’s project of converting multitude into people was realized. Over the course of the 1940s and 1950s, despite outbreaks of protest in 1945 (marked by a particularly “festive tone”) and 1948, not to mention January 1958 with the fall of the country’s last dictatorial regime, gradually “the protagonism of the multitude gave way to that of social and political organizations.” In short, Venezuela’s rapid modernization and urbanization in the first half of the twentieth century (as oil was discovered and the economy shifted from agriculture to hydrocarbons) had been characterized by a series of multitudinous protests and demonstrations. But these were
eventually absorbed and disarmed by so-called civil society. The Pact of Punto Fijo in 1958 was merely the culmination of a long process of state reaction to this ever-present multitude. In the thirty years of exceptional democracy that followed, the multitude rarely appeared: “The political institutions of mediation first replaced the multitudes and then excluded them from the political system.” But the Caracazo revealed their continued presence, now more expansive and stronger than ever. Since 1989, “the multitudes have taken to the street once more.”

The Caracazo was both new and old. It was old in that it was the resumption of habits of protest long dormant yet never entirely forgotten. It was the return of affects long repressed yet never fully eliminated. For Coronil and Skurski, it was the latest incarnation of the “river of instinctual energy that has long been coded as “barbarism” in Venezuelan cultural discourse, not least in the nation’s founding fiction, the 1929 novel Doña Bárbara. Its author, Rómulo Gallegos, would briefly become president in the late 1940s, and so contribute to the project of taming the multitude’s “energy” and “passion” through politics as well as literature. And yet the Caracazo was also new: it was a watershed in Venezuelan history, and moreover for Coronil and Skurski part of a “worldwide reordering of body politics.”

A sign of its novelty, and of the way in which it fractured the frame of political and social representation, was the fact that for a long time nobody even knew what to call the event. The insurrection “disrupted established interpretive schemes, resisting the efforts of official and opposition forces to fix them with a name.” They were “27-F” or “los sucesos” (“the events); “the disturbances” or “el sacudón” (“the big jolt”); a “social explosion,” a “poblada” (popular uprising), or “el masacrón” (“the big massacre”); or they were simply “the war.” Language could not contain what had taken place. The Caracazo was affect.
On the sidelines, a small group of young military officers were also trying to make sense of events. The Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement (Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario or MBR) was a clandestine organization, founded in 1982, that brought together would-be revolutionaries who had sworn fidelity to a vague set of ideals based loosely on the Enlightenment political philosophy of Simón Bolívar. They became convinced that the only way to achieve significant change in Venezuela was through a coup d’état. Not much had come of their plotting, however, and the Caracazo with its sudden explosion of violence on the streets took them, as much as anyone else, by surprise: they “felt aggrieved that the moment and the opportunity that they had been half expecting had passed them by without any possibility of taking action.” Before their eyes they felt they saw something like an emerging historic movement threatening the old order, but these young Turks were in no position to impose any sense of hegemonic leadership; they were “not remotely prepared.”23 The most disappointed of all at the MBR’s failure to seize this opportunity would have been the movement’s founder: a young army lieutenant who spent the morning of February 27 lying ill in bed. His name was Hugo Chávez Frías.

Chávez recognized that the Caracazo was an expression of constituent power. In its wake, he and his group accelerated their plans to take over the state, and began putting “forward the argument for a constituent assembly as the only path out of the trap” of a now bankrupt puntofijismo.24 Three years later, in February 1992, they finally acted. Yet their attempted coup was a short-lived failure. Rebel forces took provincial cities, but in Caracas Chávez was unable to detain President Pérez as planned, and he found himself surrounded and cut off in the city’s historical museum. He confessed later that “the civilians didn’t show up.”25 The people were missing. Forced to turn
himself in, the would-be coup leader asked only for a minute of airtime on national television so as to tell his allies elsewhere that they too should surrender. It was this brief broadcast that made his name, as Chávez declared to the country that “for now” the attempt to overthrow the regime had failed. On TV, speaking directly to the nation without the mediation of the MBR or any other organization, at last Chávez found his métier. Though he would soon be jailed for his leading role in the conspiracy, in the space of an instant, with a two-word phrase evoking change to come, he had identified himself with a messianic promise.

By 1994, Chávez was pardoned and released (Pérez had been impeached for corruption and thrown out of office). No longer a clandestine organization, the MBR focused on “its fundamental political strategy of demanding the convocation of a National Constituent Assembly.” In the build up to the 1998 presidential race, it was transformed into a political party: the Movement for the Fifth Republic. Running on a manifesto to build a new republic, Chávez was handsomely elected into power, winning 56% of the vote. A constituent assembly followed in 1999, and a new constitution was approved in December of that year. The constitution called for a one-time “mega-election” in which all elected officials, from city council members to president, would have to stand to be re-legitimated. On July 30, 2000, as over 33,000 candidates competed for more than 6,000 posts, in a stroke the election “eliminated the country’s old political elite almost entirely from the upper reaches of Venezuela’s public institutions.” The old guard had gone; but in each electoral race a new guard took its place. The old pact had ruptured; a new pact, in which the state would now appeal directly to the multitude through the airwaves, had just begun.
The Insistence of Posthegemony

Television has been instrumental in Chávez’s capture of the nation, from the 1992 coup attempt onwards. In power, Chávez’s folksy televised appearances and his weekly call-in talkshow “Aló, Presidente” have been cornerstones of his neopopulist appeal. Writing in 2007, and reporting on an edition of the show that lasted over eight hours, journalist Rory Carroll quotes Venezuelan political scientist Arturo Serrano’s observation that “Chávez governs from Aló Presidente.” But Serrano focuses on the way in which this “television chatshow like no other” is a vehicle for communication between the president and his colleagues and subordinates: “It is on this show that ministers find out if they have been fired or hired; it is here where mayors and governors are reprimanded for anything they have done wrong.”

Far more important is the way in which Chávez, “wizard of the emotions,” employs television to construct a new form of social pact, however precarious and ambivalent.

In April 2002, the overthrow and then precipitate reinstatement of Chávez’s regime revealed the limits of the televisual pact, and of politics through media as a whole. The coup was the all too predictable culmination of a battle for the airwaves; in the counter-coup, a mere two days later, the multitude emerged unheralded, but undisguised. In February, Chávez had sacked the president and most of the directors of the state oil company, PDVSA. Management responded with a production slowdown and then a strike; in turn, Chávez fired nineteen managers. During March and early April, constant news coverage of a gathering crisis gripped Caracas. The press and the television networks launched an open and concerted assault on the government, happily giving space to Chávez’s opponents. Only the one state-owned TV channel was
unashamedly for the regime. Chávez took to decreeing *cadenas* or “chains,” in which he obliged all the networks to broadcast his long addresses to the nation. One set of televisual discourses fought another. The commercial media only redoubled their opposition, subverting the *cadenas* by superimposing text protesting this “abuse” of media freedom, or splitting the screen between images of Chávez’s speech on one side and images of anti-government demonstrations on the other. The struggle for dominance was incarnated in split-screen TV.

Chávez opponents banged pots and pans to drown out the president’s broadcasts, and demonstrated outside PDVSA’s headquarters; his supporters gathered in televised rallies at the presidential palace. The opposition called a general strike, which became indefinite on April 10. An opposition march, heavily promoted by the commercial stations, was announced for the morning of Thursday 11. That day, 200,000 demonstrators continued beyond their stated destination, heading for downtown. The regime’s final moments began as the president tried to turn off the television networks literally as well as symbolically. As the march approached the national palace, around 1:30pm, a *cadena* was announced and Chávez appeared on the screen, broadcasting from his office in front of a portrait of Bolívar, downplaying any disturbance. While he talked, one by one the terrestrial channels disappeared from 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 riots outside the palace, superimposing their own comments, and Chávez responded live to what the TV stations were adding to the official discourse. Then the chain broke and the game was up. The networks abandoned Chávez and dedicated themselves to the footage (repeated, out of synch) of earlier events: disorganized images of stone-
throwing youths; injured people on stretchers; Chávez loyalists with firearms; bodies. Troops and tanks mobilizing, and military communiqués, marked a coup in progress. As the night wore on, state television screened nature documentaries, and then shut down entirely while the private channels returned to the airwaves in full force. A narrative emerged: that Chávez had ordered police to fire on the demonstrators. But the images never quite added up. Something always escapes. 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. Businessman Pedro Carmona appeared on television as the new president.

Twelve hours later, the previous day’s choppy and incoherent images had been played over and over, 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 diagrams and first-hand accounts provided by print journalists. The morning of
Saturday 13, headlines declared “A Step in the Right Direction.” President Carmona was sworn in and named his “transitional” government, whose first 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.” Cultural critic Luis Duno Gottberg shows how, during this interregnum “a certain sort of collectivity—understood as mob, horde, rabble, lumpen—was displaced by contrast to acceptable, democratic and organised rationalities.” Elsewhere, however, another story was afoot, and fragments of news circulated 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; of an imminent state of siege. As if from nowhere, ragged processions started 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 they broadcast official pronouncements. President Carmona declared that the situation was under control, downplaying any insubordination among the armed forces, but announced he might fire some of the high command. The pact between military and commerce was quietly unraveling. Commercial TV 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, 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 light entertainment blocked any
acknowledgement of what was slowly emerging as a pro-Chávez multitude. Abruptly, however, one channel broke from its 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, glass cracked and graffiti sprayed, and a new chain formed as all the networks switched to the same image of demonstrators “attacking” the building. 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 were thrown, 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 was 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 returned to the airwaves. Those who had re-taken the station were improvising, desperately. But they gave a version of Thursday’s events that was very different from the narrative that had been put forward to justify the coup: the snipers firing on the crowds had been shooting at chavistas, not opposition protesters. Chávez had not resigned; he was forcibly detained. President Carmona was illegitimate head of a de facto regime. Thousands of people were on the streets 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 and elation, Chávez’s vice-president, Diosdado Cabello, was sworn in as president. Venezuela now had three presidents simultaneously: Chávez, Carmona,
and Cabello. The only question, posed by the thousands at the gates of the presidential palace and still besieging the private television stations: where was Chávez?

So the unthinkable happened. As the palace effectively passed back to those loyal to the deposed regime, shortly before 3am, a helicopter brought Hugo Chávez back, 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. The coup had been overthrown almost invisibly, at the margins of the media. Democracy had returned despite a self-imposed media blackout of astonishing proportions. A massive revolt had erupted while the country’s middle classes watched soap operas and game shows; television networks took notice only in the final moments, and when compelled to do so. Thereafter they simply bore mute witness to an event almost without precedent, as the coup was brought down less than forty-eight hours after its initial triumph. With nothing to say, the following day’s newspapers simply failed to appear.

The alliance between military and business that engineered the coup was weak, and could survive only through repression or apathy. The military were reluctant to turn to repression, and the coup plotters were received not with apathy, but with an extraordinary and near-spontaneous multitudinous insurrection. The coup’s overthrow was also a revolt against a televisual regime in which Chávez himself was fully complicit. 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 the far right pact of arms and commerce to take control. In the event, however, the multitude came to fill that vacuum. The April 13 insurrection showed that Chávez’s regime is not ultimately a product of either television or charisma, but is 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. In the tumultuous two days in which the president was detained, chavismo without Chávez demonstrated a power all of its own, wrong-footing confused attempts at representation. The counter-coup points once more towards a politics beyond systematic substitutions of people for multitude, emotion for affect, hegemony for habit. It points to posthegemony.
Notes


4 Colectivo Situaciones, “¿Hay una ‘nueva gobernabilidad’?”


6 Ibid., 74.

7 Giusti, “El día en que bajaron los cerros,” 37.

8 López Maya, “The Venezuelan *Caracazo*,” 125.


10 Ojeda, “Paz a punto de cañones,” 43.

11 López Maya, “The Venezuelan *Caracazo*,” 134.

12 Coronil and Skurski, “Dismembering and Remembering the Nation,” 321.


14 Coronil and Skurski, “Dismembering and Remembering the Nation,” 323.

15 Giusti, “Noche de queda,” 75.


17 Ellner and Tinker Salas, “Introduction,” xiii.

18 López Maya, “¡Se rompieron las fuentes!” 78, 80, 84.

19 Ibid., 87, 85.

20 Ibid., 104, 101.

22 Ibid., 311.

23 Gott, In the Shadow of the Liberator, 47, 43.

24 Chávez, Understanding the Venezuelan Revolution, 32.

25 Quoted in Gott, In the Shadow of the Liberator, 69.

26 López Maya, “New Avenues for Popular Representation,” 90.

27 Wilpert, Changing Venezuela by Taking Power, 22.


29 See Uzcátegui, Chávez, mago de las emociones.

30 My description of the 2002 coup draws on my own personal experience of the event. See also Beasley-Murray, “Media and Multitude.”

31 Duno Gottberg, “Mob Outrages,” 118.