Latin America’s Left Turns
Politics, Policies, and Trajectories of Change

edited by
Maxwell A. Cameron
and Eric Hershberg
To the memory of Donna Lee Van Cott, friend, colleague, and passionate advocate for social justice in Latin America
## Contents

**Acknowledgments**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Latin America’s Left Turns: A Tour d’Horizon</td>
<td>Jon Beasley-Murray, Maxwell A. Cameron, and Eric Hershberg</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Part 1 Thinking About the Left**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The Left Turns: Why They Happened and How They Compare</td>
<td>Juan Pablo Luna</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Many Lefts, One Path? Chávez and Lula</td>
<td>John D. French</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Andean Left Turns: Constituent Power and Constitution Making</td>
<td>Maxwell A. Cameron and Kenneth E. Sharpe</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Part 2 Politics Beyond Liberalism**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Venezuela Under Chávez: Beyond Liberalism</td>
<td>Jennifer McCoy</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Bolivia’s MAS: Between Party and Movement</td>
<td>Santiago Anria</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A collaborative project such as the one from which this book has resulted involves the contributions of many individuals and institutions. Jon Beasley-Murray was as central as the coeditors to the initial conceptualization of the project, fund-raising, and recruitment of participants. We could not have completed the project without grants from the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies (and we acknowledge in particular the support of Dianne Newell and Markus Pickartz) at the University of British Columbia (UBC) and from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which supported workshops in 2007 and 2008, respectively. The Latin American Studies Program at Simon Fraser University and the Department of Political Science and the Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions at UBC also contributed generously. Jeanne Persoon and Suzy Hainsworth provided able administrative and logistical support, and useful rapporteurs’ reports were prepared by Santiago Atria, Catherine Craven, and Valerie Duquette.

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While we are pleased to acknowledge the contributions of many people other than ourselves, we must, as is customary, insist that any errors of omission or commission are strictly our own.
There are only two problems with the notion of a Latin American "left turn": first, it isn't left; second, it isn't a turn. Talk of a left turn, or even left turns in the plural, revives the hoary old opposition between "left" and "right," between governments of contrasting ideological stripes, and posits some kind of almost inevitable swing between the two. Elections are the proof of political change. Everything is to be read in the urns: the electoral victories of Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, Brazil's Lula, Bolivia's Evo Morales, and so on herald some new epoch in Latin American politics. But the left, we are told, must beware of botching its opportunity or the pendulum will inevitably drift back toward the right. So now what counts is state policy and implementation: the difference that the left in power can make, the changes it can enforce in what is still a manifestly unequal and divided social structure. For instance, the BBC heralded the presidential victory of Paraguay's Fernando Lugo, one of the newest members of the "left turns" club, by commenting on "the complex and monumental task" he faces "of bringing change to a country weighed down by decades of corruption, poverty, and inequality" (Painter 2008). It is as though the burden for change fell solely on Lugo's shoulders. Or as though, more broadly, the project of the left in power really was, as Benjamin Arditi puts it in Chapter 8 of this volume, "to change the status quo."

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. At best, its victories at the polls are the symptom of deeper changes that are taking place elsewhere. Lugo's accession to power (as well as that of Chávez, Lula, and Morales) is reaction rather than action; it is not in itself an event. The problem with the vast majority of the discussion of the Latin American left turns is that it confuses symptoms with causes. Analytically and also politically, it substitutes constituted for constituent power.
In what follows I offer an alternative account of contemporary Latin American politics, with the stress on constituent power and so on the relationship between multitude and state, rather than that between left and right. I begin with a discussion of the concept of constituent power, particularly as it is theorized by Antonio Negri (1999). I then discuss the broader processes that lie behind the so-called left turns, stressing the social insurgencies or jacqueries (popular revolts) to which the left as much as the right has been forced to respond. I spend some time on the particular case of the Venezuelan Caracazo of February 1989, both because it is one of the first such revolts that initiates the current constitutional moment and because it reveals the elements of the process with special clarity. In this sense, Venezuela is not one pole at the far end of a leftist continuum that supposedly ranges from social democracy to populism. Rather, I treat the Venezuelan model as an ideal type and suggest that the constituent processes in other countries simply follow it more or less closely. And yet, in each case, the insurgencies that initiate the contemporary left turns are embedded in complex national and regional histories. I show how the Caracazo emerged from a whole history of protests and transformations in everyday life in which constituent power is a matter of habit. Finally, I return to the present and to the so-called left turn of Hugo Chávez to consider how chavismo relates to this longer and broader account of the multitude and constituent power.

Over the course of this chapter, then, I move from the theoretical to the sociological and the historical, and from the general to the particular. That, however, is merely a convenient mode of presentation. What is interesting and exciting about the processes that have given rise to the Latin American left turns is the way they force us to rethink and rework some of the fundamental concepts of political theory. Too much discussion of contemporary Latin American politics has tried to corral it within a tired set of oppositions, not least those between left and right, or between social democracy and populism. Yet if there is something excessive about developments in the region over the past twenty years, it is also because they refuse to fit well within conventional categories. They break the frame of political representation. We see new societies in formation, and our tools to describe them still lag behind. Our challenge, as always, is to try to catch up with the creativity and innovation exhibited by the multitude of ordinary men and women throughout Latin America.

Constituent Power

The purported opposition between left and right passes over the prior distinction between constituent and constituted power. Indeed, the binary between left and right tends to ignore the question of power altogether; it makes politics a matter of ideology or policy, of the content that is to fill institutional forms that are taken for granted. By contrast, constituent power concerns the shape those forms will take. It concerns the institutions that structure the republic, and the powers that are to be accorded to them. For what is finally at stake in the succession of social mobilizations that have shaken Latin America over the past three decades, and in the variety of responses to those mobilizations on the part of elected regimes (be they of the right or the left), is the institutional legacy of creole republicanism. With Latin America on the verge of celebrating the two-hundredth anniversary of the foundation of independent states, the postcolonial settlement has been challenged and found wanting. In response, we see an effort to refound the republic. Here, then, I agree with someone such as Freya Schiwy, who argues that we are in the presence of a profound challenge to the entire postcolonial system of governance (Schiwy 2008). The so-called left turns are not simply a reaction against a failed neoliberalism, and still less the expression of periodic political fashion. They are the indication of a profound political transformation. Where I disagree with Schiwy is in the notion that this is limited to what she calls a “rescate cultural” or even a “movement of cultural reconstitución,” some kind of return to a pre-Columbian past. Though the expression of constituent power may, and indeed must, draw on older traditions and historical traditions, Schiwy’s own case study of Bolivia shows that it is also distinguished by its search for novelty, its creativity and invention, rather than by the rehabilitation of past political forms. Any new social structures to emerge from the current conjuncture will be post-postcolonial, rather than a turning back of the political clock. For the preeminent characteristic of constituent power is that it is active and expansive, rather than reactive or defensive. Indeed, it is constituted power that reacts to the insistent pressure of a multitude it can never fully contain.

Constituent power is the power to make constitutions, to shape the institutional and juridical order that will subsequently regulate society. By contrast, constituted power is the regulative power encoded in and exercised by such institutions. Hence it is that constituent power is primary, for it preexists and gives rise to the power exercised in making or preserving the law. Constituent power is the ground of politics, law, and indeed normativity as such. In Carl Schmitt’s words, “Prior to the establishment of any norm, there is a fundamental political decision of the constitution-making power” (Schmitt 2008:77, emphasis in the original). So constituent power also exists prior to and beyond the rule of law. As Hans Lindahl observes, Schmitt’s move “to recover the primacy of constituent over constituted power... aims to rescue the primacy of democracy over the rule of law” (Lindahl 2007:21). And Negri likewise stresses the fact that constituent power is “the motor or cardinal expression of democratic revolution” (Negri 1999:11). Yet none of
this has much in common with liberal democracy. For liberalism, the debate about the best form of government is already anticipated and short-circuited; from the perspective of constituent power, however, everything is still up for grabs. Indeed, the fact that it precedes the rule of law, that it trumps all laws, means that constituent power can be reminiscent of dictatorship. Though it is the power exercised by the people or, given that the "people" are a subsequent construction, by the diverse multitude that preexists the institution of sovereignty, it is also the power to decide on the exception, the power to suspend the constitution. Schmitt argues that "the distinctive position of a 'constitution-making' assembly, which convenes after a revolutionary elimination of the preexisting constitutional laws, is best designated a 'sovereign dictator'" (Schmitt 2008:109). No wonder that the exercise of constituent power can prove controversial! The expression of constituent power, and the establishment of constituent assemblies, in countries such as Venezuela and Bolivia has been quickly stigmatized by its opponents as a sign of the breakdown of democracy, rather than its renovation. We can, however, distinguish between constituent power and dictatorship if we insist that constituent power is fundamentally positive, in that it creates: it is constitution making. Dictatorship as the concentration of state power in a single office, on the other hand, is fundamentally negative, in that it withdraws: it is constitution suspending. Insofar as constituent power suspends or interrupts an established constitution, such as the decayed institutions of the creole republic, it is to gain the freedom to invent new habits and new forms of life.

 Constituted power is a delegated power: it is the result of the articulation, mediation, or, better, capture of a force that both anticipates and exceeds it. Hence the power that a political order exercises is always derivative, and that order is itself the creation of constituent power. In the words of Abbé Sieyès, "in each of its parts a constitution is not the work of a constituted power but a constituent power. No type of delegated power can modify the conditions of its delegation" (Sieyès 2003:136). For Sieyès, the task of the constituent assembly was to harmonize these two modalities of power: to ensure that government was well constituted. But the very notion of good constitution presupposes a distinction between the constituent and the constituted; it assumes that the two are not necessarily or normally in harmony. Indeed, the split between them is at the heart of what Martin Loughlin and James Walker term the "paradox of constitutionality": that the people, the presumed subject of power, are denied access to it; "the power they possess, it would appear, can only be exercised through constitutional forms already established or in the process of being established" (Loughlin and Walker 2007:1). The tension between constituent and constituted power is inevitable, as the constitution can never fully account for the power that gives rise to it. There is always something left over. As Damian Chalmers notes, then, "constituent power sig-

nifies, first, the idea of political and legal surplus" (Chalmers 2007:295). Hence it is absolutely true that constituent power appears as "excess." But this is far from the "anarchy" imputed to it. There is nothing anarchic about constituent power and certainly not in the vulgar sense of anarchy as unpatterned, formless, or chaotic. It is constituent power that gives rise to form, because it is endlessly and creatively form making. Constituted power is an attempt to arrest this creativity.

 The fiction of a social pact or contract is presented as the resolution of the tension between constituent and constituted power. Rather than true resolution, however, the notion of a pact is the means by which the state tries to call an end to democratic insurgency. The state imposes the notion of a primordial contract upon society, as mythical presupposition to guarantee its own legitimacy. The premise of the social contract is that constituent power is somehow exhausted, that constitution making is over, that the rule of law has replaced democratic insurgency. The social contract suggests that the constitution is fixed. The contract aims to secure sovereign right, to confine constituent power only to the mythic moment of revolutionary foundation, and to banish any subaltern excess to beyond the pale. It institutes hegemony as the only political game in town. Should the excessive passions and desires of constituent power return, as the repressed inevitably do, they are stigmatized as antipolitical and irrational, violent confrontation or atavistic recalcitrance. Any reminder of the primordial creativity that gives rise to social order is pathologized as an obstacle to progress. And in a similarly strange reversal, contractualist consensus, the provisional truce negotiated by a sclerotic constituted power, is presented as the only way to get things done. Now, however, the Latin American social compact is in disarray. Hence the drive to refound the republic and, more broadly, to rethink the political, not as left versus right but again and more fundamentally as what takes place in the gap between constituent and constituted power.

 The constituent moment that has given rise to the Latin American left turns is an opening. It is a recognition that, in Benjamin Arditi's words, "political history has no closure" (Arditi 2008:73). Or, more precisely, political history is always forced open by the reinvigoration of constituent power. In response, constituted power is an effort to close things down, albeit by offering new forms of inclusion, new forms of representation in response to the urgings of the multitude. The interplay between constituent and constituted power is constant. Nothing takes place in a void, and even the most spectacular of social explosions of the past few decades builds on years of more ordinary, everyday resistances and struggles. Each national and regional history has its own particularities. At the same time, however, we have seen an extraordinary resonance across different contexts that has made it possible to think, however briefly, that everything and anything is possible.
Jacqueries

It is impossible to agree with the widespread contention that the current wave of radical efforts to "refound" republican institutions began with the election of Hugo Chávez and his Fifth Republic Movement. Again, this is to confuse symptoms with causes, effects with events. If we are to understand this constituent moment as a whole, we need to look at the insurgencies that have, in almost every case, preceded the electoral triumphs of the so-called left. To put this another way, we need to go beyond the polls that are no more than symptoms of broader movements; we need, in Arditi's words, to "think outside the box and put the electoral benchmark on hold" (Arditi 2008:68). Fetishizing electoral success and governmental policies leads to a grievous reduction of our conception of the political. These successes are the outcomes of a long series of social mobilizations that date back at least to the Venezuelan Caracazo of 1989, and that include also the Argentine disturbances of 2001, the Bolivian water and gas conflicts of 2000 and 2003–2004, and the protests around Paraguay's Ycuá Bolaños supermarket fire of 2004.

Any narrative of contemporary Latin American politics that does not include this almost unprecedented conjunction of social insurgencies would be partial at best. If the region is indeed now moving toward a post-neoliberal epoch, rather than simply experiencing yet another swing of the electoral pendulum, it is thanks to these mobilizations rather than to the left-wing political cadre who are their beneficiaries. That cadre now claims to represent the forces that, almost as an afterthought, propelled the left into power in so many countries. But again I agree with Arditi that such claims to representation hardly exhaust the political.

Still, these social mobilizations are apparently stubbornly resistant to analysis, which is perhaps why they have been so consistently bracketed from so many accounts of contemporary Latin American politics. They seem so new, so different, and so disturbing. It is no doubt easier to stigmatize them as "criminal or delinquent," and so to deny them any political importance, rather than to acknowledge how they challenge us (and have challenged the Latin American left) to rethink the political.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri suggest resurrecting and renovating the old concept of the "jacquerie" to conceptualize these apparently spontaneous and disorganized uprisings. As they point out, this term has been used to describe everything from "the ferocious sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European peasant uprisings" to "race riots, various forms of urban rebellion, food riots, and so forth" (Hardt and Negri 2009:236). Of course, there is a long tradition of such brief rebellions in Latin America. Incidents such as the Caracazo have in some senses their precursors in the so-called austerity riots or anti-International Monetary Fund (IMF) riots, especially in the wake of the regional debt crisis of 1982. As John Walton documents, food riots, strikes, and social disturbances shook cities in Peru, Argentina, Ecuador, Bolivia, Panama, and elsewhere from the late 1970s in reaction to the economic and social impact of neoliberal reforms. These protests were frequently unheralded, violent, and surprisingly successful: in Walton's words, "stunned governments frequently rescinded or ameliorated the policy" that had sparked the protest. "Subsidies were restored, rate hikes canceled, and compensatory wage increases granted" (Walton 2001:321). In some cases, as in Haiti and the fall of Duvalier in 1986, such protests of moral outrage and indignation even helped to topple existing regimes. Moreover, both these protests and the subsequent social insurgencies of the 1990s and 2000s also (as I will show in more detail for the Venezuelan case) need to be seen within an even longer history of urban disaffection that spans the twentieth century. Latin America's urban masses, in particular, have long undergone a sort of training in periodic protest. And as Hardt and Negri put it, "despite their brevity and discontinuity, the constant reappearance of these jacqueries profoundly determines not only the mechanisms of repression but also the structures of power itself" (Hardt and Negri 2009:237). They indicate, we might say, the insistent pressure of constituent power, a constant low-level dissatisfaction with the conventional terms of political participation that only sometimes erupts in spectacular fashion. They become almost habitual.

To locate the origin of Latin America's constituent moment in 1989 and the Caracazo is, then, in some ways rather arbitrary. We could perhaps just as well point to the riots that broke out in São Paulo in April 1983. Or, in somewhat different register, we could look at the hybrid "micropolitics" of the same period in Brazil that brought together issues of class, gender, sexuality, and race in a heady brew that Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik describe as a "molecular revolution" (Guattari and Rolnik 2008). This micropolitics was parallel but not reducible to the organizing around Lula's presidential candidacy that eventually paid off in the election of 2002. And yet 1989 is as good a date as any. This is a year that has, of course, been celebrated for marking the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Cold War, the triumph of liberal capitalism, and, in Francis Fukuyama's turn of phrase, even the "end of history." With the benefit of hindsight, however, we can see that the rather more interesting events of that year took place in the West rather than the East. The fall of actually existing socialism in Eastern Europe ushered in neoliberalism rather than liberalism: a rampant free market and massive deregulation with gangster-style business practices and a clutch of football-club-owning millionaires.

Across the globe in Latin America, and far less fêted by the international press than events in Europe later in the year, a brief insurgency in Caracas already offered clues to neoliberalism's demise. The Caracazo ended almost as soon as it had begun and could easily be written off (insofar as it was noticed
at all) as a marginal anomaly. At the time, Venezuela was probably the region’s most stable democracy, a shining example of robust continuity by comparison with, say, Argentina, Chile, or Brazil, as these latter countries nervously emerged from dictatorship. Indeed, the inauguration of Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez was trumpeted as a beacon for the rest of the hemisphere. But in fact the demonstrations that broke out only a few weeks later were perhaps the first of the social ruptures that indicated the end of Latin America’s social pact. For in the end, what makes the Caracazo such a clear illustration of Latin America’s constituent moment is the way it so dramatically shattered the spectacle of constituted power. It was a revolt in which the political and the economic, or protests against political and economic regimes, came together in a new way. In this sense it also anticipated, for instance, the Argentine protests of 2001 that were both immediately economic (prompted by, among other things, the devaluation of the peso) and inescapably political, or rather a wholesale attack on political representation.

The problem posed by the jacquerie, Hardt and Negri suggest, is the question of political organization and political institutions: “the central program must move from resistance to proposition and from jacquerie to organization—but that is an extremely difficult task, whose obstacles we must face head on” (Hardt and Negri 2009:246). And indeed, it is this that has been the central problem facing the left governments that have come to power more or less directly in the wake of the series of jacqueries that have shaken Latin America in the past couple of decades, and that have forced a rethinking of the nature and form of political institutions. Most discussion of the so-called left turns has refused to “face head on” the difficulties of this transformation of constituent into constituted power; again, they have been too concerned with the conventional (and secondary, if not wholly irrelevant) issue of the difference between left and right. This is in part because analysts have chosen to bracket off the social insurgencies that have, in almost each and every instance, presaged a subsequent turn at the ballot boxes. Again, however, it is in Venezuela that the distinction between jacquerie and subsequent regime has been clearest, and that the problem of organization has been most sharply debated and contested. It is for this reason that Venezuela is far from being some kind of outlier, or one pole in a continuum that stretches from the Chávez phenomenon on the far left (or even “populist”) end of the spectrum to (say) the anemic social democracy still peddled by Chilean concertación. No, it is more edifying to see Venezuela as the norm, of which other cases, such as the Chilean one, are more or less pale deviations. Indeed, the reason that Bachelet’s election was indeed heralded as part of the selfsame so-called left turn was precisely because, however little she promised to change governmental policies (her election was in policy as well as party political terms more about continuity than change), as a woman, a single mother, and a former torture victim in this deeply conservative, Catholic, and still-traumatized country, she offered a reshuffling, however mild, of the protocols for political representation. Yet the problems that plagued her administration (above all, perhaps, the student demonstrations that arose shortly after her term began, in 2006) were also about the failures of the political system’s representational mechanisms and, as such an echo, however distant, of what was most clearly at work in Venezuela. In short, and allowing for the myriad differences between (say) Chile and Bolivia, Nicaragua and Brazil, Venezuela remains the ideal typical case for any understanding of the region’s politics. It is not exceptional; it is exemplary.

Where I disagree with Hardt and Negri is their suggestion that the governments put in place following this series of Latin American jacqueries (for which the Caracazo is emblematic and exemplary) in fact resolve the problems of organization that these uprisings highlight. In fact, it is when writing with Giuseppe Cocco that Negri most clearly stakes out this position, with the claim (with reference particularly to Argentina and Brazil) that what we are seeing is the emergence of a “constituent New Deal [that] organizes the strength of the subaltern classes such that they are presented, nationally and internationally, as multitudes—that is, no longer as objects of representation but as subjects” (Hardt and Negri 2009:226, 227). I am skeptical about the radicalism of either Lula or the Kirchners, or even Morales or Chávez. Indeed, the 2006 squabble between Néstor Kirchner and his Uruguayan counterpart Tabaré Vázquez over a paper mill polluting the River Uruguay, which divides their two countries, showed that both were still happy to make populist moves in defense of national sovereignty. Likewise, and for all their internationalist gestures, the governments of Brazil, Bolivia, and Venezuela are no less dedicated to upholding constituted power. In short, even the most progressive governments now in power in Latin America promote police management more than political mobilization; in reconstructing a social pact shattered by almost thirty years of social mobilization they are set on once more shoring up the façade that is constituted power. Out of the ruins of their inevitable failure, however, we may perhaps see something more interesting and more hopeful emerge. Or even in the ruins themselves: for as I hope to show, the Caracazo itself presented already at least some features of what can only be called common sense—a sense of the common. It was far from the sheer chaotic unleashing of repressed energy; within the tumult, the seeds of an alternative, if carnivalesque, social logic became apparent.

The Caracazo

In the electoral campaign of late 1988, early 1989, Carlos Andrés Pérez had run as a populist, drawing on the memory of his previous regime in the late
1970s, when the country thrived on the high price of the oil that it exported. But this was the last gasp of Venezuelan populism, to which the country would never again return. For on returning to power, he soon announced a packet of drastic neoliberal reforms. One of the consequences of these policies would be a dramatic jump in the costs of public transportation. On the morning of 27 February 1989, commuters on the outskirts of Venezuela’s capital refused to pay the higher prices demanded of them. This was the comparatively mundane beginning to the Caracazo. It began with a move for auto-valorization: a refusal of the prices imposed from above, and the values that they implied.

Within hours, protest spread all over the capital city and across the country in what was an apparently "anarchic movement, without direction, totally spontaneous, in no way preconceived by any subversive organizations" (Giusti 1989:37). By midmorning, people had built barricades and were stopping trucks, above all those thought to carry food, to empty them of their merchandise, as well as looting 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 spread news, communicated rebellion, and ferried personnel (López Maya 2003:125). 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. Groceries and clothing were taken to those who were unable to participate in the pillage 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" (Coronil and Skurski 1991:317, 291). 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" (Ojeda 1989a:43). 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 halfway aware of what was going on, told “that nothing out of the ordinary was happening” (López Maya 2003:134). It was not until the afternoon of the following day that a government official even tried to address the nation. When eventually the minister of the interior appeared on television, halfway through his appeal for calm 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 it was completely 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 F. Coronil and J. Skurski observe, the “traditional language of populism” was abruptly abandoned. Indeed, Pérez was now a president “without a people” (Coronil and Skurski 1991:321). The multitude had taken its place. With the state’s representational strategies bankrupt, massive repression was unleashed. For the next few days, the center of Caracas was a war zone. “Caracas was Beirut”: a city at the epicenter of a civil war (Ojeda 1989b:33). Up to a thousand people were killed as firefight rang out downtown and the military fired artillery rounds almost indiscriminately at tower blocks, seeking out snipers but also in fear at what might lie within. In the words of one journalist, “behind that silent cement the multitude is hidden. Thousands of eyes observe our movements” (Giusti 1989:75).

The real fear provoked by the social mobilization of February 1989 was less aarchy than the glimpse of an alternative, almost unimaginable social order. The protests revealed elements of creativity and self-organization—incipient and undeveloped, to be sure, but further elaboration of the networks that emerged in the uprising was soon cruelly curtailed. Clearly, the most spectacular effect of the Caracazo was the way it comprehensively undermined the myth of any social pact that allegedly sustained the legitimacy of either Pérez’s government, or indeed the Venezuelan social order as a whole. But it would be a mistake to see the disturbances as simply negative, simply reactive. The Caracazo was an expression of constituent power in that it presented the seeds of alternative political and social structures; it suggested that “another world” was possible, even though that alternative as yet had no name. Indeed, in that the events were led by no party and spurred by no slogans, the Caracazo seemed to resist representation altogether: its constituent potential was far from solidifying into some constituted mold.

**Old Mole**

1989 heralds a new moment in Latin America’s political history, but its relation to that history is complex. The upsurge of discontent and violence that spoiled the triumphalism of Venezuela’s new government was surprising and unheralded, but it also drew on a long if almost subterranean tradition. It appeared to come from nowhere, but is better understood as Marx’s “old mole” of revolution, which burrows underground only to surface dramatically at the most unexpected of moments (Marx 2005:198). Yet however embedded the...
Caracazo was both a tradition of social rebellion and also in the everyday practices of ordinary Venezuelans, the other surprise was that it seemed to lead to no determinate outcome. The mole returned underground almost as soon as he had poked his head above the surface. The country entered a period of latency; it was a long time before the trauma of social protest found political articulation. But this only goes to show that that articulation, when finally it arrived, was arbitrary. It was symptom rather than direct product. It is true that in the end the “left turn” in Venezuela, and indeed throughout Latin America, claimed to be able to respond and give form to the upheavals to which they were belatedly reacting. Chávez (and Morales, and Kirchner, and Lula) appeared to give voice to the energies and desires that had undermined the previous social order. But the gap between protest and project, between constituent and constituted power, demonstrates that in no way does the one follow naturally from the other. Another world is still possible.

Venezuela had been the prime Latin American example of a pacted democracy. Pérez’s presidential inauguration was to have cemented the country’s position at “the ‘center’ of world democracy,” paraded before an unprecedented gathering of world leaders from 108 countries (Ojeda 1989b:33). Having avoided the political violence that had blighted so much of Latin America, and relishing its oil wealth, the country 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” (Ellner and Salas 2006:xiii). Its success apparently demonstrated the benefits and viability of a formal social pact, embodied quite literally the “Pact of Punto Fijo” of 1958. Venezuela’s major political parties had agreed to defend the constitution and to respect electoral results; they had established a minimum common program and a promise to share power with electoral rivals; and they had incorporated elements of so-called civil society, such as labor unions and professional associations. It was under the auspices of puntofijismo that, in the subsequent three decades, the country 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 by the tidal surge of an irrepressible multitude, and then by the state’s vicious abandonment of even the pretense of hegemony.

The trigger for the Caracazo was no more (and no less) than habit. Commuters were accustomed to paying one price for public transport; they protested when they were suddenly forced to pay another. In response to the shock doctrine of neoliberal reform, the Venezuelan population took violent umbrage. The uprising was an expression of an instinct for self-preservation or survival. But the impulse to demonstrate also drew on traditional habits, a hidden tradition to which politicians and political scientists had been blinded in their celebration of prosperity and peace. Margarita López Maya empha-

sizes the continuities between the 1989 rebellion and previous moments of social protest: a 1902 British and German blockade of Venezuela’s ports, for instance, had 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 and ran on into 1936. General José López Contreras, Gómez’s successor, tried to convert the multitude that had expressed its displeasure into a people with which the state could negotiate (López Maya 2000:78, 84). Slowly, this 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” (López Maya 2000:87, 85).

In short, Venezuela’s rapid modernization and urbanization in the first half of the twentieth century 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, then, was itself the culmination of a long process of state reaction to this ever-present multitude. In the thirty years of exceptional democracy that followed, “the political institutions of mediation first replaced the multitudes and then excluded them from the political system.” But old habits die hard. The Caracazo revealed their continued presence, now more expansive and stronger than ever. Since 1989, “the multitudes have taken to the street once more” (López Maya 2000:101, 104).

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. 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” (Coronil and Skurski 1991:299, 334). A sign of its novelty, and of the way it fractured the frame of political and social representation, was the fact that for a long time nobody even knew what to call it. The events “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 poblaâda (popular uprising), or el masacrón (the big massacre); or they were simply “the war” (Coronil and Skurski 1991:311). Language could not contain what had taken place. It would take some time before a politician arose who could give voice to the energy that had burst out in the Caracazo, who could claim (for the time being at least) to have tamed the old mole. But rather than taming it, perhaps Hugo Chávez merely forced it underground once again.
Chávez to the Rescue

If we imagine Chávez coming to the rescue, we must ask what he came to save. Surely, as much as he claims to channel the historic discontent of those long marginalized by the pact of Punto Fijo, and before that by the entire post-colonial settlement of the creole republic, equally his purchase on power is based on the promise that only he can ensure Venezuela’s continued governability. Rather than a force of disorder, Chávez implicitly presents himself as the sole assurance that the country is not to disintegrate in violent conflagration. He reacts to the Caracazo with the claim that only he can prevent its reoccurrence. He invokes the grievances and desires of those who have repeatedly found themselves excluded from the country’s political system, so as to better capture and mold them within structures that bear the imprint of constituted power. Chávez is the epitome of constituted rather than constituent power, but also the demonstration of the former’s dependence upon the latter. He resurrects politics in the Schmittian sense of friend versus enemy (chavista versus escudado) so as to ward off another, more fearful politics for which such names would make no sense at all, an unnameable politics of those who (still) have no given name. For all the resentment and vituperation of the Venezuelan middle class, in some sense Chávez arrives on the scene to save the Movement for the Fifth Republic (Movimiento Quinto República, or MVR). Running on a manifestó to build a new republic, Chávez was handsomely elected into power, winning 56 percent 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 be somely elected into power, winning 56 percent 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 reelected. On 30 July 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” (Wilpert 2007:22). 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 over the airwaves, had just begun.

Ever since, and throughout his regime, Chávez has appealed to this constitutional transformation as the foundation and anchor of his “Bolivarian Revolution.” Millions of copies of the document itself were printed and distributed throughout the country, and the president has been accustomed to carrying it with him at all times and to gesturing to and with it during his political speeches. It is symptomatic that, in reaction, one of the first (and indeed
very few) acts of the brief government of Pedro Carmona, installed for forty-eight hours after the soon-reversed coup of 2002, was to declare that the name of the country itself, which the first words of Article One of Chávez's constitution had declared to be the "Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela," was to be once more simply the "Republic of Venezuela." Symbolically, this was the Carmona regime's attempt to overthrow the constituent process. So the multitude that came into the streets that April to reinstate their president were also seeking to put that process back on track. But Chávez, too, was forced to react and adjust. His government took a very different tone thereafter, as if in somewhat belated recognition of the debt he owes the multitudes who have now twice very visibly provided the force that propelled him to power. Some of that reaction has taken the form of a radicalization (a turn toward the discourse of socialism); but other aspects of that reaction have been more literally reactionary, not least in the attempt to rewrite the constitution in such a way as to consolidate the state apparatus. For the antichavista scaremongering around the constitutional referendum of 2007 did indeed have a point: the proposed reforms were another instance of constituted power folding back on constituent power. It is therefore significant that the measures failed to be approved, and mostly because of the widespread abstention on the part of many who would otherwise support the Bolivarian Revolution. That exodus even from the plebiscitary structure of chavismo demonstrates that the multitude refuses to be seen as a plebs, as a people to whom the premier can appeal if and when he wants. For the multitude is always destined to betray the people, to refuse the contract offered it.

Conclusion

This is no swing between right and left. In Venezuela as throughout Latin America, it is clear that the impetus behind these badly named "left turns" has been overwhelmingly constitutional. They are impelled by a series of rebellions whose target is the entire political order and its representational system. They come into office almost by default, as the representational fiction of the creole republic collapses around their heads. And the policy differences between them (nationalization or privatization, free trade or tariffs) are secondary to the shared goal of recreating constituted power, re-legitimizing the political system. So Chávez’s repeated referenda, his incessant retweakings of the political rules that he himself has put into place, are not so much an expression of a process that has gone off the rails, still less the sign of some personal megalomania, as a return to the political baseline. It is the constitution that is still at stake in the ongoing viability of the Bolivarian republic. And across Latin America, the "left turns" continue to be about a conflict between the subterranean power of a constituent power that is closer to the surface than ever, and a constituted power that is more or less frantically trying to reinvent liberalism for these post-liberal times. Or as Raúl Sánchez and Yann Moulier Boutang put it, in the wake of the absolute "refusal of the coloniality of power," Latin America has become "the revolutionary frontier of politics" thanks to the reemergence of a multitude and its "forceful moments of constituent power" (Sánchez and Boutang 2009:36, 39). What remains to be seen is whether the new forms of governability and new forms of subordination incarnated by leaders such as Chávez, Kirchner, Morales, and Lula, will manage to keep the old mole underground for much longer (Colectivo Situaciones 2006; Zibechi 2009). My wager is that, despite setbacks such as the more recent episodes in Honduras (which failed precisely because it was an attempt at mobilization from the top down), we haven’t seen the last of the multitude and its constituent power. And perhaps next time the immanent social logics of common, carnivalesque redistribution and autovalorization will prove somewhat more durable. Perhaps.

Note

1. I thank Max Cameron for first suggesting this observation.