

GEORGE CICCARIELLO-MAHER

We Created Chávez

A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF THE
VENEZUELAN REVOLUTION



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Photographs by Jeff St. Andrews

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FOR ABBEY AND OAKLEY FRANCISCO In memory of Joel Olson

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Introduction. What People? Whose History?

The people is a poet singing to its own prayer,
although a rosary of sorrow hangs on its chest.
We need to sharpen our aim, our target practice
and although it says ugly words, the people has the right
and it doesn't make me angry, but it's the pure truth:
there is no uglier word than this society.

— Alí Primera

“Who are you? What are you doing here?”

When we got to La Piedrita, they already knew we were coming. If not for the phone call they received from a trusted comrade, then from the video cameras lining the perimeter of this revolutionary zone that jealously guards its autonomy from all governments, right or left. If not from the cameras, then from the network of eyes dispersed across the community, always alert to unknown or unrecognized individuals. And if not from all that, then certainly from the guard at the top of the rickety stairs that climb from the parking lot of the apartment blocks into the chaotic jumble of the *barrio* that lay behind it. He greeted us down the barrel of a chrome nine-millimeter pistol with stern questions: “Who are you? What are you doing here?” If we didn’t have good answers for these questions, there might have been a problem. But indeed, we had an excellent answer: two short words, “Valentín Santana.”

Just minutes before, my photographer and I had been enjoying the warm June dusk a few blocks below, near a small park in the Monte Piedad neighborhood of 23 de Enero, a notoriously revolutionary area of western Caracas perched precariously above Miraflores Palace, the nominal seat of state power. We were chatting, laughing, drinking beer and *miche* — a surprisingly potent homemade firewater distilled from sugarcane — while others play dominos, when a new friend raised the inevitable question of why we were there. We had come to understand the revolutionary collectives that constitute Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez’s most radical support base, to grasp their political vision and their often tense relationship with the process of political transformation known as the Bolivarian Revolution. Had we gone to La Piedrita? No, we hadn’t. Our only contact with the collective had been gazing in awe at the nearby murals surrounding their zone of influence, the most spectacular of which is a massive image of Jesus holding a Kalashnikov, bearing the message, “Christ Supports the Armed Struggle.”

“Well then, you *must* meet Valentín,” this new friend insists, and I know immediately just who it is that he means. Valentín Santana is the historic leader, the iconic figurehead, and the most publicly recognized member of La Piedrita. After a few frenetic phone calls in which our proposed visit is repeatedly rebuffed, our persistence pays off and we are cleared to head up to La Piedrita. We begin the climb upward, past Blocks 5, 6, and 7 of 23 de Enero, after which the multicolored superblock towers for which the area is famous give way to shorter blocks that are grouped tightly to form large, enclosed squares that are, from a military perspective, easier to defend.¹

They knew we were coming, and yet they performed surprise, hostility, and militant discipline. Here, gun pointed at my chest, I can’t help but feel like a young Herbert Matthews in the Cuban Sierra Maestra (in fact, La Piedrita adjoins the Sierra Maestra sector of 23 de Enero). Matthews, so the story mistakenly goes, was duped by Cuban guerrilla commander Fidel Castro, who in 1957 allegedly marched a small number of troops in circles past the *New York Times* journalist to exaggerate the strength of his forces. Although this description of events has since been discredited, Matthews’ name became synonymous with journalistic naïveté.² This lesson notwithstanding, the power of guerrilla theater has not waned, with revolutionary movements — from the Sandinistas to the Zapatistas and beyond — increasingly fighting their battles in the media and the reactionary forces arrayed against them doing the same. But as I sit here witnessing a similar display, it dawns on me that there is little disconnect between image and actuality, that

managing appearances is the performative equivalent to managing reality. La Piedrita's show of force itself requires the same sort of autonomous local control that it seeks to perform: the image *is* the reality, and the reality is one of radical autonomy from the state. This autonomy is not limited to the revolutionary context of contemporary Venezuela; La Piedrita has been fighting for more than 25 years.

Like many of the collectives dotting the revolutionary landscape of western Caracas, La Piedrita emerged as a spontaneous community response to the scourge of narcotrafficking, as young revolutionaries — imbued with the history and ideology of struggles past — confronted both the drug trade and the violently corrupt state that facilitated it (see chapter 3). The collective's beginnings were modest, with a single member (Santana himself) devoted to what he calls *trabajo de hormiga*, “ant work”: publishing a small community newsletter that interwove references to Che Guevara with recipes and birthday wishes.³ This same spirit of humility was reflected in their chosen name, which refers to a “pebble,” little more than a mild nuisance. But La Piedrita would soon be something more than a nuisance to *mal-andros* (delinquents) and police alike, stamping out the drug trade entirely and effectively forcing the police out of their community. Today, La Piedrita's autonomous status is best expressed by the large, hand-painted sign that greets all visitors: “Here La Piedrita gives the orders and the government obeys.” This is no exaggeration: the Chávez government once sent a captain of the military reserves into the zone, who was immediately taken into custody by the collective. When the official protested, explaining that he was merely there to scope out a possible escape route for the president in the event of a repeat of the 2002 coup, the response from La Piedrita was unambiguous: the government does not *tell* us anything, it must *ask*.

As I await Santana's arrival for my interview, the air in this corner of 23 de Enero is thick with tension. After a pipe bomb exploded prematurely while being placed outside the offices of the radically anti-Chavista chamber of commerce, Fedecámaras, on February 24, 2008, government forces determined that a militant who was accidentally killed called this area home.⁴ Although Fedecámaras is widely loathed among Chavistas for participating in the short-lived 2002 coup in which Chávez was briefly replaced with the organization's then-head Pedro Carmona Estanga (see Second Interlude), planting pipe bombs was beyond the pale. For the first time in years, ever since these local militias had reached a sort of *détente* with the central state, police entered the area, searching homes for suspects associated with the self-styled “Venceremos Guerrilla Front,” whose name appeared on flyers

found at the scene. For many, including Valentín Santana and La Piedrita, this unwelcome incursion was an open attack on their tradition of local autonomy, and they responded by making that autonomy perfectly clear: on April 3, a multitude of local collectives including La Piedrita engaged in an “armed blockade” of 23 de Enero, appearing publicly in ski masks and armed to the teeth to shut down the community with burning tires and barricades as a sharp warning to the government. Chávez issued a stern rebuke on his television program *Aló Presidente*, insisting that “these people don’t look like revolutionaries to me, they look like terrorists”; he even suggested that they had become infiltrated tools of the CIA.⁵

I am struck by the soft-spokenness of this militant organizer, who, with his light skin and army-green cap, looks more like an Irish Republican Army member than the bearded guerrillas more commonly associated with Latin America. Now, sitting on a crumbling wall across from us, Santana scoffs at the suggestion that La Piedrita might be even inadvertently serving the interests of the imperial enemy. Instead he catalogs the collective’s achievements: after the drug trade and the violence associated with it were stamped out, they turned to eliminating even private drug abuse and alcoholism and now were poised to confront domestic violence. Alongside the elimination of such scourges, the collective had long promoted alternatives, including cultural and sporting activities aimed at reinvigorating a sense of revolutionary community among local youth. In this struggle on two fronts—against threats to the community and toward the regeneration of its cultural fabric—Santana has given more than most. In 2006, his own young son Diego was killed alongside Warner López, another young member of La Piedrita (according to Santana, they were killed by members of another radical armed organization, José Pinto’s Tupamaro party).

Later that same month, we were invited to ride along with these revolutionary collectives as the extreme left of the Chavista bloc made its displeasure clear in a caravan throughout the entire *barrio* of Catia, within which 23 de Enero is but a small part, insisting that “we are not terrorists.” Nevertheless, despite such militant pleas, tensions would only increase. In the year that followed, members of La Piedrita declared several opposition leaders “military targets,” they attacked the opposition’s television station Globovisión and other such targets with tear gas as “punishment” for crimes past and present, and Santana even publicly threatened the life of Marcel Granier, the head of the other major opposition television network, RCTV.⁶ In response, Chávez again declared them “terrorists” and issued an arrest warrant for Santana himself. Noting the difficulty of arresting members

of such militant organizations (one previous effort to arrest Santana had failed), Chávez even insisted that he would “go get him myself” and made clear what was at stake, adding, with a feigned ignorance of the group’s history, that, “We can’t allow La Piedrita such-and-such to become a state of its own.”⁷ As a result of such conflicts, it might not be surprising to find critiques of Chávez on the far left: after all, these revolutionary militants now confront a Venezuelan state that, with its bloated bureaucracy, sordid corruption, violent police, and chaotic prisons, looks much like the state that had been killing and torturing them for decades.

In preparation for the caravan of militias, a young woman wandered through the crowd, offering to paint revolutionary slogans on car windshields. When one angry militant insisted, only half-seriously, that she adorn his windshield with the phrase “Death to Chávez!” she gasped audibly. To fully grasp the relationship between these most revolutionary organizations and Chávez’s government, we must understand not only her astounded gasp but also the angry outburst that elicited it. In other words, we must attempt to grapple with the fact that the vast majority of such militants — those who deeply despise corruption, bureaucracy, and even the state itself and are more likely to associate that state with torture, murder, and “disappearance” — *are still Chavistas*, at least for the time being.

I probe this peculiar tension during my discussion with Valentín Santana, attempting to wrap my head around a central element of the political process underway in Venezuela as a whole, namely, the relationship between the radical autonomy from the state that such collectives maintain and the unification of revolutionary forces to take and exercise state power under Chávez’s leadership. But such a fundamental tension, which in many ways constitutes the central theoretical problematic underlying this book as a whole, cannot be explained away easily. I ask Santana, this figure deemed a “terrorist” by the president and who that same president would soon seek to have arrested, what he thinks of Chávez. It is dark and so I cannot be certain, but his face seems to wear a smirk that suggests he foresees my confusion at the counterintuitive position he is about to assume: “Chávez is our maximum leader,” he insists.

The “Paradoxes” of Power

And so I begin from a seeming paradox: despite La Piedrita’s militant autonomy and rejection of the Venezuelan state, its members nevertheless pledge their loyalty, however temporarily and contingently, to the man

currently sitting atop that state. As should be abundantly clear by this point, what matters more than anything else for this revolutionary collective and groups like it is not what happens in the gilded halls of official power. More important than *el presidente* is *el proceso*, the deepening, radicalization, and autonomy of the revolutionary movements that constitute the “base” of the Bolivarian Revolution.⁸ But this is not to say that all that rests atop this base is mere “superstructure,” that the realm of official politics is completely inconsequential, that the state itself does not enjoy a degree of autonomy. Rather, as La Piedrita’s seemingly paradoxical fidelity to Chávez illustrates, there instead exists a complex and dynamic interplay and mutual determination between the two: movements and state, “the people” and Chávez.

By beginning with a paradox, we enter into an interstitial space, one suffering the painful in-betweenness that is to be against (*para*) the grain of the present (*doxa*): between the great leader and no leader at all, between the state and its absence, between paranoid errors of right and left, with the paradox of paradoxes best expressed in graffiti daubed near El Valle in southern Caracas reading, “Long Live Chávez, Not the Government.”⁹ Paradoxes, however, are generally intellectual creations, with the definition of *doxa* reserved for the privileged few. Like so many apparent paradoxes, therefore, this one too unravels and is to some degree resolved, in practice, by the work of 27 million tugging hands that strip away its congealed synchrony, its frozen timelessness. My starting point in this book is, therefore, not the one we most commonly associate with contemporary Venezuela. It is not the story of an evil and all-powerful, would-be dictator centralizing all power in his own hands, nor is it the tragic account of a well-meaning populist led astray by the inherent corruption of power. On the contrary, it is not the story of a Great Leader blazing a shining path and dragging the people, naïve and pliant, in His turbulent wake. It is not, in other words, any of the many stories we hear about Hugo Chávez Frías, but that is simply because it is not a story about Chávez at all.

Far too often, discussions of contemporary Venezuela revolve around the figure of the Venezuelan president. Whether from opponents on the conservative right or the anarchist left or supporters in between, the myopia is the same.¹⁰ This is not without reason: since Chávez’s election in 1998 after his imprisonment for a failed 1992 coup attempt, Venezuela has become a radically different place, and the “Bolivarian Revolution” that he inaugurated (in name, at least) has seen power wrested from old elites and unprecedented social improvements and is poised to transform even the state itself. But although Chávez is indeed important—and I hope even-

tually to recover the complexity of his current relationship to revolutionary movements and collectives — my point of departure must be a different one. Because often it is only through the simplicity of inversion that we can arrive at a higher level of subtlety, of complexity, and of nuance, the practical resolution of this paradox comes in the insistence from the outset that *the Bolivarian Revolution is not about Hugo Chávez*. He is not the center, not the driving force, not the individual revolutionary genius on whom the process as a whole relies or in whom it finds a quasi-divine inspiration. To paraphrase the great Trinidadian theorist and historian C. L. R. James: Chávez, like the Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture, “did not make the revolution. It was the revolution that made” Chávez.¹¹ Or, as a Venezuelan organizer told me, “Chávez didn’t create the movements, *we created him*.”¹² By refusing to center our analysis on the Venezuelan president from the get-go, by resisting the constant historiographic temptation that James scornfully dismissed as “the personification of social forces,” by averting our eyes from the dazzling brilliance of the commanding heights of political power — whose light is blinding in more ways than one — a whole new world comes into view.

But in a way, this simple displacement of Chávez’s centrality tells us little in and of itself; as James rightly warned, “even that is not the whole truth.” Specifically, simply taking the focus off Chávez does not tell us where that focus should then fall, where our gaze must instead be directed. If “we created him,” who is this “we”? Is it the working class? The peasantry? The informalized urban lumpenproletariat? If Chávez does not drive the Revolution, if we deny him that coveted throne, then which historical subject assumes it? Or, is the very concept of a historical subject — a single bearer of future history, be it an individual or a class — far too unitary and homogenizing to accurately explain contemporary Venezuelan political dynamics? More importantly, however, simply refusing to focus on Chávez the man tells us little about the complexities of the relationship that exists between this as-yet unidentified revolutionary subject, the transformative process as a whole known as the Bolivarian Revolution, and Chávez himself (and, more generally, the state apparatus that he inhabits).

What People?

In pressing toward an answer, we could do no better than to follow the lead of a revolutionary organizer from the *barrios* of Petare in eastern Caracas, when she asks insistently, “Why is everyone so worried about Chávez? What

about the people? Worry about the people.”¹³ But if this is a people’s history, the term *people* complicates before it clarifies, raising more questions than it answers, and I must ask: “What people?” and, “Whose history?” Some radical theorists in the United States and Europe have recently rejected “the people” as a useful category for revolutionary change, arguing instead — based largely on the experience of the French Revolution — that “the people” carries within it conservative, unitary, and homogenizing tendencies.¹⁴ But one need go no further than a dictionary to see that such an understanding has little relevance to the Spanish-speaking world: the Royal Spanish Academy offers a series of five definitions of the people, or the *pueblo*, four of which refer straightforwardly to the inhabitants of a particular space or territory, but the last of which is subtly subversive, denoting instead the “common and poor” members of a population — the oppressed.¹⁵ The history of Latin American revolutionary and social movements show us this distinction in practice: more often than not, “the people” has been taken up as a banner by precisely those same “common and poor” while simultaneously being deployed by governments, populist and nonpopulist alike, in an effort to maintain the status quo.

Thus, this idea of “the people” in Latin America is an instance of struggle, and although the phrase *people’s history* was pioneered and popularized in the U.S. context by Howard Zinn, the contours of such a history in the Latin American and Venezuelan context refers to a far more specific content. Argentine-Mexican philosopher of liberation Enrique Dussel elaborates upon this radical potential embedded within the concept of the people, drawing inspiration from Fidel Castro’s 1953 speech “History Will Absolve Me,” in which Castro adds to the concept of the people the peculiar modifier *si de lucha se trata*, if it is a question of struggle. Dussel insists that the *pueblo* is *not* a concept of unity, but one that instead “establishes an internal frontier or fracture within the political community,” and stands, as he puts it, “in opposition to the elites, to the oligarchs, to the ruling classes of a political order.”¹⁶ For Dussel, the Latin American *pueblo* is instead a *category of both rupture and struggle*, a moment of combat in which those oppressed *within* the prevailing political order and those excluded *from* it intervene to transform the system, in which a victimized *part* of the community speaks for and attempts to radically change the *whole*. And the external division that the *pueblo* marks through its struggle is, according to Dussel, reflected in its internal multiplicity, in which dialogue and translation between its component movements serve to provide a common identity in the course of struggle.¹⁷

The “history” corresponding to this “people” would, therefore, be of a specific kind: rather than the traditional history that focuses on a progression of political leaders, the sort of “history from above” that leads to the exaggeration of Chávez’s role, and beyond even a history *of* those poor and oppressed constituents of the people, this would instead be a history from *below*, one driven by the struggles and the self-activity of the people themselves, a struggle *by* the people over what it means to be “the people” to begin with. To do so, we must think in specifically (albeit not exclusively) Venezuelan terms, and in Venezuela past and present, the central reference point of struggles over what “the people” means has been the country’s national anthem, “Gloria al Bravo Pueblo,” or “Glory to the Brave People.” In fact, the anthem has often constituted the very terrain of those struggles, embodying and crystallizing this division between those wielding power and its victims: “Invoked in official contexts, such as the state ceremonial occasion and the school salute to the flag, the hymn embalmed the *bravo pueblo* in the distant past; to sing it spontaneously in a popular assault on the street was to resuscitate it as a living critique, not a ratification of authority.”¹⁸ Whereas those in power have used the anthem to signal national unity, those they oppress draw upon its more radical elements—phrases such as “Death to oppression!” and “Down with chains!”—to mobilize the energies necessary for the radical transformation of the political system.¹⁹

But our history does not begin as far back as 1810, the year in which Vicente Salías penned “Gloria al Bravo Pueblo.” If what interests us is a people’s history of the process *currently* underway in Venezuela, we must inevitably seek a more concentrated focus on recent history, grasping those foundational moments that provide the parameters for today’s struggles. In what follows, I begin this history in 1958, the year of the overthrow of Venezuela’s last *unelected* dictator, Marcos Pérez Jiménez, and the year that nominally marks the establishment of Venezuelan “democracy.” If it seems strange to *begin* a history of popular struggle with the establishment of a representative democratic system, it is because my approach is also a conscious inversion of traditional fables in which formal democracy is seen as the result—as the ultimate outcome of those struggles and their unquestioned *telos*, the final objective of struggle, and therefore also the moment at which that struggle ceases. Instead, the establishment of formal democracy in Venezuela marked the beginning of another struggle, a struggle for both democracy and equality as *substantive* and not merely formal parameters of social life.²⁰ It is this longer struggle that continues today; the formal democratic regime that was established in 1958 and later consolidated in the two-

party, power-sharing pact signed at Punto Fijo (and therefore colloquially known as *puntofijismo*) was in many ways established as an attack on the people, as a subversion of the popular will that had ousted the dictator, and as an effort to prevent the incursion of the people into the halls of official power. This was the essence of the “pacted” democracy, and even “undemocratic democracy,” of which many critics spoke throughout the years and in which the very force that made the democratic transition possible needed immediately to be tamed, its energies stifled and channeled.²¹

For this, Venezuela’s ostensible “founding father” Rómulo Betancourt was both more responsible and less apologetic than most, and he would take aim directly at the idea of “the people” itself. According to Betancourt, the communist-turned-rabid-anticommunist who took power in 1959 in the first free elections to follow the dictatorship, “the people in the abstract does not exist,” and the concept instead represented a weapon, “an entelechy which professional demagogues use in seeking to upset the social order.” Instead of the people, Betancourt could see only a multiplicity of associations — “the political parties, the unions, the organized economic sectors, professional societies, university groups” — through which demands must be channeled.²² Any attempt to unify these demands was seen by Betancourt and others as inherently dangerous to established power and potentially anarchic: frantically fearing the forest, he could only tolerate the trees. The irony is that in his open hostility to the concept of the people, Betancourt was in agreement with his archrival, Fidel Castro: the radically subversive potential of the *pueblo* was a mortal danger to men like Betancourt who sought only to control and channel its energies.

Thus, while Betancourt rode to power on the radical energies unleashed among the popular masses, he was nevertheless deeply suspicious of those who demanded radical rather than gradual change, those who sought socialism over capitalism, and above all those who understood democracy as something more direct, more unfettered, and more participatory than the limited democracy that Betancourt would favor. As a result, and against this radical alternative, Betancourt and others sought to construct a democratic system that was protected from the people, in which all demands were to be diverted through institutional channels and specifically the two predominant political parties. This was a system of democracy as institutionalized antidemocracy, in which the people could only appear as a fragmentary and segmented nonpeople. And so we find at the very heart of Venezuela’s so-called democracy a veritable conspiracy against the *pueblo* as a radical mo-

ment of rebellious energy. What is peculiar here is that, even as Betancourt denied the existence of the people, its spectral presence — the fear it inspired in elites — conditioned the creation of a system that sought to prevent the people from coming together as a force. The antipopular political system, therefore, was an expression, however negative, of the power of the people, and the history that this book tells is one that draws upon the same source, albeit from the opposite direction.

In constructing such a system, Betancourt's weapon of choice was domestication: the slow and systematic effort to build institutions capable of co-opting popular discontent and channeling it down official pathways. As though responding to his own experience of the Betancourt years, Venezuelan folk singer Alí Primera — whose verses grace each of my chapters — would later write that “the docile [*manso*] people are always corralled, but this doesn't happen if they are fierce [*montaraz*].” While Betancourt sought to create a *pueblo manso*, however, he could not tolerate the *montaraz*, and therefore turned to a dual strategy: domesticating those who would submit to the hegemony of his Acción Democrática Party (the workers' and *campesino* movements) while excluding and attacking those (particularly students and communists) who would not.²³ This people's history, this history “from below,” begins with the immediate rebellions that greeted Betancourt's election; if he was suspicious of the radical movements, then this suspicion was mutual. As though knowing what would be in store, the poor *barrios* around Caracas rioted upon receiving word of their first truly “democratic” president, and Betancourt never forgave the capital city for its betrayal. After his inauguration, mass mobilizations continued, since even this limited democratic opening — when combined with the exhilarating experience of having overthrown a dictator — only served to stoke the flames of rebellion. Students occupied their campuses, peasants their land, and the unemployed marched in the capital demanding work. Picture this: less than one year after this “father of Venezuelan democracy” was elected, his government was shooting people dead in the streets, and the majority of his first years in office was spent under the iron heel of a state of emergency.²⁴

Thus unable to successfully incorporate and accommodate this insurgent energy from below into a system capable of defusing it from above, Betancourt turned to exclusion, on the heels of which repression closely followed. His government gradually pushed radical sectors outside of the democratic institutions, thereby converting what might have been a loyal opposition into a disloyal one. This “outside” crystallized as the guerrilla war that began not long after Betancourt came to power; hundreds of

young Venezuelans, inspired by the recent success of a small band of Cubans, sought to overthrow Venezuelan democracy. According to any of the standard criteria—be they military or political—the Venezuelan guerrilla struggle was a resounding and abject failure; the guerrillas grew increasingly alienated from their base, and this base largely opted for the “apparent contradiction” of electoral participation.²⁵ But what is key is to recognize that those radical energies from below that had generated the guerrilla struggle to begin with, those demands of the popular masses that the new democratic regime was either unwilling or unable to meet, did not simply disappear into thin air. Instead, the ostensible failure of the guerrilla struggle gave way to a dispersed multiplicity of revolutionary social movements, and former guerrillas themselves courted “legality” in a variety of ways, with both sectors twirling helically around one another in a constant struggle to both revolutionize the state and avoid its tentacles.

Whose History?

This is, therefore, not a history of the “exceptional” Venezuela, seemingly the only Venezuela visible to many social scientists in the United States and some in Venezuela. For decades, Venezuela had appeared to many as an island of stability amid the economic chaos, military rule, and civil war that had swept the region during the 1960s and 1970s. Some, like the political scientist Daniel Levine, even claimed that this stability derived from the ability, first of Betancourt and then of the two-party system, to incorporate conflict and change successfully into the sphere of official politics by “organiz[ing] social life from top to bottom,” thereby undercutting more radical threats.²⁶ This view neglects the degree to which incorporation operated alongside exclusion, and the fact that Venezuelan society clearly was not organized “from top to bottom,” as the “bottom” would soon make abundantly clear.²⁷ And as this “power from below” was gradually excluded, “power from above” became increasingly alienated, delusional, and, above all, rigid, with this rigidity coming as a direct counterpart to the ostensible stability of the system. As Mirabeau said of the colonists in Haiti, those elites who had considered themselves exceptional for so many years “slept on the edge of Vesuvius without even knowing it.”²⁸ So too the academics like Levine, who would make a prognosticative error of epic proportions with the claim that “In Venezuela, the future lies with cautious men.”²⁹ Such claims—and the “exceptionalism thesis” that undergirded them—would soon be left buried like Pompeii under so much molten ash.

As Venezuela's system of representative democracy grew increasingly rigid and exclusionary, corrupt and violent, the warning that the Theban chorus offered Antigone, "Bend or break, bend or break," became ever more pertinent.³⁰ For every demand that went unfulfilled, pressure only increased. It was during this time that Alf Primera — who was not coincidentally known as "the people's singer" — would turn the national anthem into a veritable battle hymn. Shortly before his suspicious death in 1985, Primera prefaced his rendition of "Gloria Al Bravo Pueblo" to an audience in Barquisimeto with the following words: "To purify it, to purify it among ourselves, to purify it in our hands, in our hearts, in our eyes, in our soul. To purify it for the times they have stained it. Our people's highest song, the song forged in the paths and the battles that gave us the name of Venezuelans, of the homeland. The song of always, the song of the birds, of the children, the song of Venezuelan unity, the song of future combat." As time passed, as the economy worsened, as neoliberal reforms pushed millions more into extreme poverty amid a collapsing currency and skyrocketing prices, and as rebellion became an everyday occurrence, this was a system that was unbending and could only break.

And break it did on February 27, 1989, on the very day that president Carlos Andrés Pérez's neoliberal reform package entered into force; the camel's back broke, and the *barrios* exploded in a week-long riot, known as the Caracazo, that approached the level of mass insurrection (see the First Interlude). During the Caracazo, *bravo* assumed more and more the radical content of the *pueblo* itself, *si de lucha se trata*, resignified in the streets according to its colloquial double meaning: "pissed off" or "fed up" with a state of affairs. Noun and adjective inverted, "the people are fed up [*bravo*]" stood as a straightforward indictment of the political system as a whole. During the insurrection — as the *bravura* of anger was matched only by a bravery against the most uneven of odds — the national anthem again proved prophetic, as Venezuelans and the world would "follow the example given by Caracas" in its moment of fury and the political process that the Caracazo inaugurated. Those fed-up people would not find much relief in the short term: somewhere between three hundred and three thousand were slaughtered to restore the façade of democratic stability, and a dying system limped on despite having already received the blow that would eventually kill it.

The subject of my history is this *bravo pueblo* that made its most resounding appearance in 1989, which simply by appearing exploded the prevailing "myth of harmony" that was premised on its invisibility.³¹ What had masqueraded as singular "harmony" was now revealed as two, with the pre-

viously hidden side of the equation gathering under the mantle of “the people” (not, however, without maintaining its hard-won internal differentiation).³² This is a history written from that hidden nonplace that would only appear as fully visible in 1989, what Alí Primera calls “the other Venezuela,” one possessing even its own “truth”:

I come from where you’ve never gone . . .
the other Venezuela, the Venezuela of the poor,
the Venezuela with no reason, no reason to exist . . .
The truth of Venezuela isn’t found in the Country Club,
the truth is found in the hills [*los cerros*, the *barrios*]
with the people and their discontent.

This is a history of exclusion and frustration, torture and massacre, wealth and thievery, the wink of the politician and the nod of the bureaucrat. But it is also far more than that because limiting our history to the crimes of the powerful would be to remain mesmerized by their own governing myths, myths that imply that they actually are “in” power rather than merely occupying ultimately fragile positions within the political institutionalism of the state. If the moral bankruptcy of Venezuelan elites was revealed for all the world to see in the 1989 Caracazo, their political fragility appeared most clearly in a pair of failed coups in 1992, the first of which — on February 4 — was led by Chávez himself.

We Created Chávez tells the story of what happened between 1958 and 1989, the story that binds the 1989 Caracazo to Chávez’s failed 1992 coup and eventual election in 1998, and ultimately the story of the relationship between this *bravo pueblo* and the political process currently underway. Thus, although this is a “people’s history,” as my subtitle suggests it is also a history of the Bolivarian Revolution, and while narrowing the scope of the former it seeks to expand our understanding of the latter: this revolution has been a far longer process than many recognize. Most historic accounts of the Bolivarian Revolution begin in 1998, the year Chávez was elected, as an expression of the precipitous collapse of Venezuela’s two-party system.³³ While this moment was undeniably important for what has come since, I call it an “expression” consciously: Chávez’s election, much like the disgust felt toward those he replaced, was the *result* of previous struggles, and so we must turn our gazes back still further. Some existing histories do so, looking for the origins of Chávez’s electoral success in his notable *lack* of success in 1992 and his live television appearance that marked that failure. Taking full responsibility for his failings on that day — a rare occurrence for political

figures in Venezuela — Chávez spoke two fateful words that would become a slogan overnight and cement his political future: the rebels, according to this young lieutenant colonel, had failed *por ahora*, “for now.”

This, too, was a crucial moment, but again, merely tying 1998 to 1992, rooting Chávez’s successful seizure of power through the ballot in his unsuccessful effort to do so by the bullet, is not enough. A history of the trajectory stretching from 1992 to 1998 is still firmly a history “from above,” a history of state power, first of failure and then of success in “seizing” the state, rather than being a history “from below,” a history of popular power. To rewrite this history from below, it is necessary to look back even further, narrowing even more the list of existing historical accounts to those that locate the fundamental impetus for both 1992 and 1998 in an earlier date: 1989, the Caracazo. Here the shift is a fundamental one: if 1992 and 1998 center on Chávez the individual and the state as his object, 1989 reveals that this individual project rests on a mass base more bent on *destroying* than *seizing* the state. Whereas 1992 and 1998 center on questions of “constituted power,” of the institutionalized power of the state, 1989 was instead an explosion of “constituent power,” that radically unmediated force aimed against those institutions and which itself resists institutionalization.³⁴ Yet even many of those histories that recognize the fundamental importance of 1989 do not follow this importance to its ultimate conclusion, choosing instead to center contemporary history on Chávez himself, thereby contributing, however inadvertently, to what Velasco deems “a historical genealogy that rests on the rise of Hugo Chávez as the redeemer of long-suffering popular sectors, whose political awakening can be traced, at best, to the mid and late 1980s.”³⁵ I hope to go further. After all, where did 1989 come from? Here our regression is not infinite, and the clash between the “from below” and the “from above” that occurred on the streets in February 1989 finds both sides constituted in the years after 1958: in the guerrilla struggle and its collapse and the period of autonomous movement-building that followed in its wake.

Changing the World?

If, in what follows, I largely privilege such radically “constituent” moments as foundational to understanding what is going on in Venezuela today, the point is not to neglect the “constituted” power of the state or the moments of “constitution” in which the two enter into a transformative relationship.³⁶ Thus, in destabilizing this seeming paradox between the autonomy

of radical Chavistas *from* the state and their support *for* Chávez, we also destabilize the ostensible opposition underlying its appearance as a paradox by reformulating the classic question of revolutionary politics and the state: Do we “change the world without taking power,” as the title of John Holloway’s book would have it?³⁷ Or is it only by seizing such power that transformation becomes possible to begin with, as goes the retort of Holloway’s detractors?³⁸ Once again, the opposition is merely apparent, and we begin to overcome it by subjecting its opposing terms to the creative dynamics of popular practice. The story that follows, the story of recent Venezuelan history, is, therefore, not the story of one side or the other, of how to seize the state as is or to avoid its sinister tentacles entirely. It is instead one that rejects the very terms of this opposition in the manner of Enrique Dussel, who insists that “to speak precisely, power is never *taken*.”³⁹ The Bastille can be *taken*, the Winter Palace can be *taken* by a small number of disciplined Bolsheviks, but power is something that is *held* by the people, and the problems emerge with the institutionalization of that power, which Dussel deems both necessary and profoundly dangerous.

Put differently, my goal here is to avoid the twin dangers that plague contemporary discussions of revolutionary change in Latin America in particular: the tendency to fetishize the state, official power, and its institutions and the opposing tendency to fetishize antipower. Thus, alongside the general fetishism of the state that manifests in the Venezuelan context as a fetishization of Chávez the man, there stands as well an equal and opposite fetish of what has been called “horizontalism,” the fetish of refusing or ignoring the state a priori as in Holloway’s insistence that “the world cannot be changed through the state.”⁴⁰ To fetishize means to worship something human as though it were divine, and I hope that the literal fetishism of both positions is clear: the first refuses to see the state (and Chávez) as produced by human hands and therefore subject to radical transformation; the second—in its denial of human organizational capacities, of organic leadership generated through struggle, and of the delegation of power—sees such transformation as utterly impossible and futile.⁴¹ For both, in other words, the state is a superhuman entity to be either worshipped or feared but never transformed.

Although the practical dangers of fetishizing the state are more acute and more obvious in discussions around Venezuela, we cannot afford to neglect the dangers that come with fetishizing horizontalism, especially because these have methodological implications for how to write a history like this one. If a focus “from above” creates an evident blindness toward movements

“from below,” the fetish of the horizontal creates a more specific blind spot in which movements and organizations that are not sufficiently “horizontal” either are misrepresented as being more egalitarian, directly democratic, or antistate than they are or are rendered illegible and invisible.⁴² Here, organizations such as La Piedrita stand as a sort of double warning of the difficulties of an abstractly horizontal approach. Despite the collective’s organic relationship with the local community, to study it horizontally would be to ask the impossible; even insisting on speaking to nonleaders would mean asking members of a tightly disciplined organization to break that discipline. Blinkered horizontalism, in other words, would render the internal functioning of collectives like La Piedrita even more opaque than they already seem, as when one uses the wrong lens to view an object, but as I will show, their importance to the process is undeniable.

In the history that follows, the difficulty of the seemingly “vertical” relationship between mass and vanguard (like the paradox of movement and state, autonomy and unity) is held at bay on the practical plane, as different stages of struggle against this corrupt and violent “democracy” instituted in 1958 have manifested in different forms of struggle, different tools, and different weapons. For example, the early guerrilla struggle to which we turn first was an unapologetically *vertical* enterprise, and indeed, much of the debate shaping that struggle revolved around what, if any, political control would be exercised on the military structures of the guerrilla fronts. While this verticalism resulted largely from its military character, we should not let this obscure the very real elements of racial and gender privilege operating within the struggle. While my account has been enriched by discussions with rank-and-file participants of the guerrilla struggle (including women and Afro-Indigenous fighters), these can in no way serve as a substitute for discussions with those actually charged with making and executing the broader strategies and tactics that determined the course of the armed struggle. For better or for worse, the most radical demands of the people were represented most often through vanguardist structures during this period. This does not excuse errors, of which there were many, frequently tied to but not reducible to verticalist elements such as vanguardist *foquismo*. Nor should it obscure that at certain points the guerrillas were more alienated from their nominal support base than at others; more than anything else, this fact doomed the armed struggle and determined the strategic transformations that would emerge in its wake. Nevertheless, these guerrillas remained, to some degree, the most revolutionary and intransigent representatives of the *pueblo* as a radical critique of oppression and

inequality, and it is in this sense that the history of the guerrilla struggle remains, however imperfectly, a “people’s history.”

In the same way that fetishizing the horizontal might lead to a neglect of leadership, so too could such an approach exclude a priori those who have opted strategically to work either within or in a close relationship with government institutions on the national, state, or local levels. Indeed, to exclude those who see in such institutions an unavoidable instance of struggle would be to neglect the vast bulk of revolutionaries on the ground driving the Bolivarian process forward. Thus, that many high-ranking government officials have been drawn from the ranks, not only of the guerrilla struggle but also from other sectors of the revolutionary movement, does not exclude them from this history; rather, it poses again and in a slightly different way the seeming paradox from which I began: those who have suffered most from the violence of the state in the past have nonetheless come to occupy positions in that state. While such figures must be balanced with those who voice very real and credible concerns about movement autonomy and radicalism, be it from the sphere of semiofficial movements or those who reject any and all association with the state (but without ceasing, for the most part, to support the president and the process), this does not undermine their relevance.

Just as these twin fetishes fail by establishing too firm a distinction between what they support and what they oppose, and just as my objective is to reestablish the linkages they cut, so too must we speak of reestablishing a relationship between the horizontal and the vertical more generally. In this, we can do no better than to turn to the Venezuelan revolutionary, former guerrilla, and inspiration for much of what has been called “Bolivarianism”: Kléber Ramírez Rojas. In a 1994 essay about the movements that had sprung up in the *barrios* in the aftermath of the 1989 Caracazo rebellions, Ramírez—who only recently had lent his pen to the forces behind Chávez’s failed 1992 coup to draft a litany of documents outlining the structure for a revolutionary government—reflected on both the successes and failures of the horizontalism of these popular movements. While admitting that the radical insistence on horizontal modes of organization emerged as a justified form of self-defense from the old and corrupt political parties, and that the very real autonomy this horizontalism afforded the movements constituted “a well-deserved political and social victory,” Ramírez nevertheless argued that through the fetishization of dispersed popular assemblies, this “triumph has been converted into its own defeat.” “From a strategic perspective,” he continued, “horizontality will be necessary for the development of the com-

moner [*comunero*] state; but tactically, at this moment it becomes a serious error because it foments the isolationism of the popular bases from national struggles.”⁴³ It is in an effort to avoid these twin fetishes that, when it comes time to conclude, I will speak neither of power from above nor entirely from below, but instead of a “dual power” that exists in ongoing, tense, and antagonistic opposition to the state, straining insistently upward from the bases to generate a dialectical motion allowing the revolutionary transformation of the state and its institutions, with the ultimate goal of deconstructing, decentralizing, and rendering it a nonstate. For Kléber Ramírez, this dialectic of dual power means the “liquidation of the current . . . state” and its replacement with what some might, again, deem a paradox: a “government of popular insurgency.”⁴⁴

One final warning before I begin, and it is related to what I have just said, because there is something else worth noting in this exaggerated emphasis on horizontalism, this abstract imperative to “change the world without taking power.” Too often, discussions of how to change the world degenerate into model-building exercises, and too often the raw material for such exercises is provided by Third World revolutionaries and the model constructed by First World philosophers. If the impetus to “change the world” by taking power derives in many ways from the Russian Revolution, the model for *how* to do so in the Latin America of the 1960s was in many ways provided by the Cuban Revolution as filtered through the writings of the radical French intellectual Régis Debray. In 1963, Debray made a pilgrimage to the Sierra of Falcón to speak with the Venezuelan guerrillas. More than four decades later, I have had the opportunity to speak with many of those same people, as well as a multitude of younger organizers from various sectors of the struggle. While it may therefore seem that I would want to liken my task to Debray’s, nothing could be further from the truth. This is not merely because Debray’s *foquista* “model”—in which the guerrilla struggle is led by a small elite of mobile *focos* detached from any social base—was a caricature of the Cuban Revolution, but also because its application in Venezuela and elsewhere was nothing short of catastrophic.

Debray’s name, therefore, stands not as an inspiration but as a warning about the danger of models for how to “change the world.” Has horizontalism become a model in its own right, one revitalized by the momentous nature of the Zapatista insurgency and amplified by theorists like Holloway under the banner of antipower? If so, does the imperative to refuse power accurately reflect the Zapatista experience, or is it as much a caricature of that experience as was Debray’s theory of guerrilla warfare? Do the Zapatis-

tas refuse all power or do they seek to regenerate a new form of power from below? Do they refuse all institutions or do they merely subject those institutions to the constant pressure of popular intervention (in, for example, revocable mandates and popular assemblies), what Dussel calls “obediential power,” building on the Zapatista imperative *without* creating a model?⁴⁵ And even if such theories actively reflect Zapatista practice, is it possible to generalize and export the particular and local experience of the Zapatistas across the continent and the world without contributing to what I have called elsewhere “anarchist imperialism”?⁴⁶

This book consists of three sections of three chapters divided by two explosive historical interludes, two “constituent” moments of rupture that represent qualitative leaps in the history of the Venezuelan people. The first section tracks the guerrilla struggle, its failure, and the tide of urban militancy that arose in its wake; the very same vanguardism that doomed the guerrillas was disproven in practice by the rebellious masses. This is a history of failure, of defeat, but one in which those very defeats provide fodder for subsequent victories. In the first section, chapters move chronologically (approximately by decade: the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s); the second section rotates our axis in an effort to think sectorally according to some of the more important social movements that emerged in the wake of, and indeed often from within, the guerrilla struggle in a flourishing of student, women’s, and Afro-Indigenous organizing that centers on the 1970s and 1980s but that also extends into the present. The final section then rotates our axis once again, speaking broadly according to economic class but always casting a critical eye toward traditional understandings of who it is that constitutes the political subject of revolutions. When the subjects of these final chapters — the working class, the peasantry, and the so-called lumpenproletariat, or informal urban poor — are combined with those of the previous section with which they overlap, we have the broad strokes of what is understood in Venezuela and much of Latin America as “the people.”

It would be all of these separate and cross-cutting slices that, seen more broadly, emerged from the guerrilla struggle, underwent a period of autonomous development, and then began to slowly reaggregate with (para-)military elements in the run-up to the 1992 coup and the 1998 election, propelling Chávez to the seat of constituted power. But these two dates — 1992 and 1998 — do not provide the content of our explosive interludes, regardless of their importance; in fact, I speak of these moments of “constituted power” only in passing. Instead, our interludes describe those radi-