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REVOLTAS POPULARES CONTEMPORÂNEAS NUMA PERSPECTIVA COMPARADA

The streets as examples of “true” democracy? The South-American experience

*As ruas como “verdadeira” democracia?
A experiência Sul-Americana*

*Las calles como experiencia de “verdadera”
democracia? La experiencia en America del Sur*

Carlos de la Torre*

Abstract: Building on the existing literature this paper analyzes how – at the turn of the century and into the 21st century – activists in Ecuador, Venezuela and Bolivia constructed narratives that focused on “the people in action”. Advocates of the insurrections framed myths of the pure and oppressed people revolting against the tyranny of economic and political elites. Elites responded by differentiating the authentic people from the mob. Indigenous and other poor and non-white protestors were portrayed by elites as the rabble, as uncivilized, and in general, as a danger to democracy.

Keywords: Ecuador; Bolivia; Venezuela; Popular Revolts.

Resumo: Com base na literatura existente este estudo analisa como – na virada do século e no século 21 – ativistas no Equador, Venezuela e Bolívia construíram narrativas voltadas para “o povo em ação”. Os defensores das insurreições enquadraram as suas ações em mitos dos povos puros e oprimidos se revoltando contra a tirania das elites econômicas e políticas. Elites responderam diferenciando “o povo autêntico” da turba. Manifestantes pobres, não-brancos e indígenas foram retratados pelas elites como a ralé, como não civilizados, e, em geral, como um perigo para a democracia.

Palavras-chave: Equador; Bolivia; Venezuela; Revoltas Populares.

Resumen: Sobre la base de la literatura existente este trabajo analiza cómo – en el cambio de siglo y en el siglo 21 – activistas en Ecuador, Venezuela y Bolivia

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construyeron narraciones centradas en “la gente en acción.” Los defensores de las insurrecciones enmarcaran sus acciones en mitos de los pueblos puros y oprimidos rebelando contra la tiranía de las élites económicas y políticas. Elites respondieron al diferenciar “el pueblo auténtico” de la turba. Manifestantes pobres, no blancos e indígenas fueron retratados por las élites como la chusma, los incivilizados y, en general, como un peligro para la democracia.

Palabras clave: Ecuador; Bolivia; Venezuela; Revoltas populares.

Introduction

Ecuador, Venezuela and Bolivia lived through episodes of collective action that according to participants redefined the meanings of the terms “the people”, and “democracy”. Between 1997 and 2005 the three elected presidents of Ecuador were deposed in instances that many interpreted as the sovereign people rebelling against illegitimate governments. In Venezuela, both, opponents and supporters of President Hugo Chávez literally took over the streets. For some Venezuelans, the future of democracy depended on getting rid of the democratically elected president. For others, Chávez became the symbol of democracy. From 2000 to 2005 Bolivia went through a cycle of insurrections that led scholars to debate whether that nation underwent a revolutionary moment. Democratic legitimacy was understood in these three nations to lay in crowd action where the people directly expressed its sovereign will.

Political scientists interpreted these events as examples of a new pattern of political instability in Latin America. According to Arturo Valenzuela, “in presidential systems, a crisis will often cease to be primarily about specific grievances and their redress, and become instead a question of whether the chief executive himself should go (VALENZUELA, 2008, p. 10). Broadening Valenzuela’s argument of “presidencies interrupted”, Aníbal Pérez-Liñán wrote, “as in previous decades, democratically elected governments continue to fall, but in contrast to previous decades, democratic regimes do not fall down” (PÉREZ-LIÑÁN, 2007, p. 3). Pérez Liñán argues that the new patterns of political instability have several distinctive traits. First, differently from the past, the military have refused to take power. Second, the mass media uncovered scandals of corruption. This led to uprisings against corruption and mismanagement of the economy. Third, congress became the institutional site for the constitutional transfer of power. Sometimes legal

mechanisms such as impeachment were used. In others, unconstitutional actions such as legislative coups against the president were utilized.

Focusing on Ecuador León Zamosc questioned the institutionalists bias of these approaches. He rightly argues that Valenzuela and Pérez Liñán normatively differentiate institutional and non-institutional collective action, and hence cannot explain the logic of protest in how these presidents were removed. He argues that these episodes should be understood as forms of “popular impeachment” in which presidents were removed or forced to resign as a result of the central role played by protests. Popular impeachments, Zamosc argues, “apply the ultimate accountability sanction for a president: removal from office” (ZAMOSC, 2013, p. 265).

Eduardo Silva analyzes episodes of contention in Argentina, Bolivia and Ecuador as a Polanyian reaction of society against neoliberal economic policies. Differently from the past when unions played a central role in protest, the actors of episodes of collective action became territorially organized popular sectors and peasant movements. The roadblock emerged as a highly effective repertoire of contention. When combined with mass demonstrations and rallies in front of government buildings they forced government officials to negotiate. Protestors framed their demands around broadly defined notions such as neoliberalism. Framing demands in terms of “national sovereignty, democratic participation and state intervention brought people together” (SILVA, 2012, p. 24).

Building on the existing literature this paper analyzes how activists and participants constructed narratives that focused on “the people in action”. Advocates of the insurrections framed myths of the pure and oppressed people revolting against the tyranny of economic and political elites. Elites responded by differentiating the authentic people from the mob. Indigenous and other poor and non-white protestors were portrayed by elites as the rabble, as uncivilized, and in general, as a danger to democracy. The subaltern contested elitist understandings of the sovereign people. Indigenous people, for example, constructed themselves as the embodiment of the authentic *pueblo*, and as the defenders of democracy and national sovereignty. As these debates illustrate, “the people” is not a datum of the social structure but a category of political analysis (LACLAU, 2005, p. 224). “The people” is not a fixed historical event. It is an ongoing claim made by actors (NÄSTRÖM, 2007, p. 645). Similarly, democracy became a word with different and contrasting meanings. Whereas for some “mob action” and

“anti-systemic movements” attempted against democracy, for others, “true and authentic democracy” laid in the actions of insurgents.

To uncover the contested views of democracy and the different meanings of the category of the people I analyze three historical events. Following William Sewell (1996, p. 844) historical events are understood as “a ramified sequence of occurrences that is recognized as notable by contemporaries, and that results in a durable transformation of structures”. The first event analyzed in this paper is the popular insurrection or military coup of January 2001 in Ecuador. With the goal of ending with neoliberalism and corrupt democracy a coalition of junior military officers and social movement leaders – including the powerful indigenous movement – overthrew the president. The events that unfolded in 2001 resulted in the collapse of political parties. Colonel Lucio Gutiérrez, the leader of the failed coup, was elected in 2003 with the support of the indigenous movement. Yet, he was overthrown in 2005 after losing the support of the indigenous movement, and facing protests that demanded that all politicians should go. Rafael Correa, another outsider, was elected in 2006. When he came to power the party system collapsed. He reversed neoliberal policies with a statist and redistributive model of development. The second event comprises the demonstrations for and against Chávez that were used as justification for the coup of April 2002, and his restoration to the presidency two days later. Subsequently Chávez radicalized his revolution with the goals of establishing what he referred to as, “Twenty First Century Socialism”. This vague term is understood by his regime as a statist pattern of development that aims to redistribute oil rent, and as a model of participatory and direct democracy that will eventually replace “bourgeois liberal democracy”. The third event was crowd action against neoliberalism and for national sovereignty in Bolivia during “The Gas War” in October 2003. This revolt, perceived by contemporaries as a revolutionary moment, resulted in the end of the rule of political parties named as pacted democracy, and neoliberalism. Subsequently Evo Morales, the nation’s first indigenous president, was elected on a platform to decolonize Bolivia.

Expressing the People’s Sovereignty Through a Coup d’état in Ecuador

In January 2000 an alliance of junior army officers in combination with the leadership of the indigenous movement, and other social

movements overthrew President Jamil Mahuad. He presided over a generalized economic crisis, and in a desperate move to stop hyperinflation adopted the US dollar as national currency. Falling oil prices – the main export –, and the devastation of the coastal region by the El Niño climatic phenomenon caused the economic breakdown. The financial system collapsed despite a billion dollar bail out. The gross domestic product shrank by 7.1 percent. Most citizens were enraged by the use of public funds to save bankers who contributed to Mahuad’s presidential campaign.

Indigenous protestors rallied to Quito “to overthrow the three institutions of state power” (VARGAS, 2001, p. 101). Indigenous demonstrators surrounded the buildings of the Supreme Court and the Congress that were protected by the army. In the morning of January 21 the army allowed about seven thousand indigenous protestors to take over the Congress. The Junta of National Salvation made up of Colonel Lucio Gutiérrez, Antonio Vargas (president of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador CONAIE), and Carlos Solórzano (former president of the Supreme Court) replaced Mahuad. Vargas spoke to the nation saying, “The Ecuadorian people have triumphed... We will work from an ethics based on *amaquilla*, *amashua*, *amallulla*; that, from now on, will be the slogan for all authorities in the Ecuadorian state. That is to say, no lying, no stealing, and no idleness” (WALSH, 2001, p. 177).

Jamil Mahuad had left the presidential palace because the army told him that they could not protect his safety. In the evening a massive rally marched from Congress to take over the presidential palace. The army and police allowed marchers to reach their destination. The Junta of National Salvation assumed power. It lasted for a few hours because the US government and the High Command of the Armed Forces forced a “constitutionalist” solution and opposed this coup d’état. Congress dismissed Mahuad arguing that he had abandoned power, and named vice president Gustavo Noboa the new head of state.

During the rebellion of 2000, “the people”, formerly understood mono-culturally as mestizo, became associated with the indigenous people that occupied Congress and other symbols of state power. Indigenous people were portrayed as the new incarnation of the pueblo, and even as the “vanguard” of all oppressed Ecuadorians in their struggle against corruption, and structural adjustment policies.

Antonio Vargas and colonel Lucio Gutiérrez claimed to represent the interests and aspirations of all Ecuadorians. Vargas claimed, “the people have triumphed, not the military, nor indigenous people, but

the Ecuadorian people... here we are Indians, military, the people (VARGAS apud Araúz, 2001, p. 85)”. Colonel Gutiérrez contended, “The Ecuadorian people understood that sovereignty rests in them. When their rulers, misled them, betrayed them, lied and stole, the sovereign people rose up and told them, enough! (GUTIÉRREZ apud DIETERICH, 2000, p. 166.)”.

Democracy was lived as the occupation of public spaces by people who felt excluded. This explains why indigenous collective action targeted taking over the symbols of state power such as the congress, the presidential palace, and the Supreme Court. When indigenous people entered into the congress, shamans burned *palo santo*, a type of wood, to “purify this institution”. Congress was renamed as “the house of the people”, the term “compañero” was used to address each other, and the military draped *huipalas* (the indigenous multicolored rainbow flag) on their uniforms.

The crowds enacted the same scripts that they followed when President Abdalá Bucaram was ousted from the presidency in 1997. On 5 February 1997 a coalition of indigenous organizations, workers unions, and middle to upper class people marched to demand that Bucaram step down. The media inflated the size of the demonstration, claiming that 2 million, roughly the same number of people who voted for him, marched that day in Quito and other cities in the highlands. Bucaram was accused of corruption and of betraying the people by enacting neoliberal policies. By a simple majority, Congress dismissed him from office on grounds of “mental incapacity” the next day. Despite the fact that they had no medical proof to back up this allegation, and bypassing vice president Roasalía Arteaga, they designated Fabián Alarcón, the then president of the Congress, as Bucaram’s “legal” successor (DE LA TORRE, 2010, p. 80-118). The notion that the people’s sovereignty is manifested in their numbers and in their capacity to topple presidents functioned as a mobilizing myth in 2000 when indigenous crowds occupied the congress and marched to the presidential palace. President Gutiérrez later suffered the same fate as his ousted predecessors. Middle class demonstrators in Quito marched to the presidential palace to throw out Gutiérrez chanting “¡que se vayan todos!” (Let them all go!), and congress toppled him with the dubious legal argument that he had abandoned power.

Some politicians and analysts interpreted the events of 2000 as a coup, and there is plenty of evidence that shows that indigenous and other social movement leaders plotted with the army to get rid of Mahuad (GRAU, 2000; HERNÁNDEZ, 2000). After the coup failed,

upper-middle class and mostly light skinned people marched to “defend democracy”. In the “march of the turned-off cellular phones” in Quito many chanted: “We are not *indios!*” Their “defense of democracy” was as much about a political regime as a reaction to the idea that an Indian could be president of Ecuador. The media and some white politicians explained the indigenous and military alliance of January 2000 with paternalistic arguments that portrayed indigenous people as naïve masses manipulated by the military. Some whites and mestizos used openly racist charges such as “Indians polluted Congress with their bad odor” or that Indians were “thieves of democracy”.

Democracy became a contested category. Whereas democracy for most actors is synonymous with crowd action that directly expressed the people’s sovereignty, they differed in their views on whether democracy ought to be mediated or not. When upper and middle class actors defended liberal democracy they focused on the institutional fabric and the procedures of democracy. Simultaneously, they appropriated the label of “democrats” not just to criticize the actions of insurgents, but also in order to portray indigenous people as inherently non-democratic or not yet prepared for democracy.

Leftwing activists viewed direct democracy as a superior alternative to representative democracy. Sociologist Napoleón Saltos, who was the coordinator of an alliance of social movement organizations and who plotted with junior military officers, characterized these events as “Quito’s Commune” in clear reference to Marx’s theorization of the need to replace bourgeois democracy with direct assembly democracy (SALTOS, 2000). The strategy of social movements was to replace Congress and the institutions of the liberal state with the People’s Popular Parliament for National Salvation.

This Popular Parliament intends to build a new political authority, an alternative to the national Congress and a participatory space in which the people can discuss social, economic, and political problems and collectively make proposals without having to go through the bureaucratic mechanisms of the electoral and political party structure (WALSH, 2001, p. 174).

They were inspired by a ‘recent tradition’ of struggle that includes the Assemblies of the People in February 1997 (formed after the overthrow of Bucaram), the People’s Constituent Assembly in October 1997 (an alternative space to the Constituent Assembly for constitutional reform), as well as the failed experiment of the People’s Congress in 1999 (WALSH, 2001, p. 200).

In these assemblies, everybody was allowed to speak, and organizers tried to arrive to consensus and avoided voting (ANDOLINA, 2003, p. 743).

Indigenous leaders and intellectuals also favored direct democracy. They argued that indigenous and non-indigenous politics are fundamentally different. The principles of direct democracy, community, respect for others, transparency, consensus, equilibrium, and face-to-face dialogue differentiate indigenous from non-indigenous forms of democracy. According to indigenous intellectuals such as Luis Macas, “participation of the community members in decision making takes place at community council (*cabildo*) meetings. This means that community actions are governed by consent and discussion is held until consensus is reached” (MACAS; BELOTE; 2004, p. 224). Sociologist León Zamosc writes that in Ecuador

about 2,100 Indian communities function as self-regulated entities based on the authority of their *asambleas* (in which everybody participates) and *cabildos* (executive committees of five members). Important issues are discussed in the *asambleas*, where agreement is usually reached by consensus rather than voting. The decisions are binding for all members, with formal and informal mechanism to ensure compliance. (ZAMOSC, 2007, p. 16)

Sanctions for not complying with the decisions of the majority include monetary fines and withholding services such as running water or electricity (COLLOREDO-MANSFELD, 2010).

Indigenous and some left-leaning activists had no qualms in plotting with the military to orchestrate the coup of 2000. Their actions are not just explained by the severity of the economic crises. It was grounded on their normative differentiation between “bourgeois formal democracy” that allegedly protected the interests of the ruling class, and “authentic democracy” where the people express their sovereignty without the mediations of parties. The self-described defenders of democracy while rightly questioning the undemocratic actions of the leadership of CONAIE in the coup d’état also used undemocratic and racist colonial images. They constructed themselves as “true democrats” while portraying the indigenous movement as not ready yet for democracy.

Military Coup or Popular Insurrection in Venezuela?

As in Ecuador the crises of representative institutions in Venezuela led to an increase in the number and frequency of protest in the 1990s (LÓPEZ-MAYA, 2005). Like in Ecuador, Venezuelans understood that democratic legitimacy lied in the number of people demonstrating. After Chavez's advent to power in 1999 the hegemonic struggle was articulated around the term "democracy" (CANNON, 2004, p. 294). Chávez was represented, either, as the essence or the denial of the democratic ideal. For his supporters, Chávez had protected the nation from a privileged few, and was carrying out a project to bring social justice. For the opposition he was an autocrat who had concentrated power threatening the wellbeing of the nation with ill-fated policies especially with regards to oil.

A coalition of business, labor, and civil society organizations, with the active support of the privately owned media, took to the streets to protest against what they perceived as the undermining of democracy. They focused on changes to the educational law, agrarian reform, and the dismissal of technical personnel in the state petroleum company PDVSA and their replacement with Chávez's loyalists. At the end of 2001 the opposition paralyzed the country in what they called a "civic work-stop." In 2002 the opposition organized a massive demonstration to celebrate the fall of the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez. April 11, 2002 hundreds of thousands took the streets to protest the changes of top managers in the state petroleum company. Labor leader Carlos Ortega urged the crowd to go to the presidential palace to "oust Chávez" (LÓPEZ-MAYA, 2005, p. 268). They marched for about seven miles to the Miraflores Palace chanting, "The people united will never be defeated". On their way more people joined in. "The extraordinary size of the march strengthened the opposition's perception that the whole country was with them and that history was in their side" (CORONIL, 2011, p. 35).

The television showed images of Chávez's loyalist firing upon the crowd. 19 people died, and even though it was later shown that those images were manipulated by the media and were not accurate, the general perception at that time was that the president was repressing the people. The massive protests against Chávez, and the images of chavistas firing at demonstrators were used as a pretext to orchestrate a coup. Arguing that Chávez had abandoned power, the businessman Pedro Carmona with the support of high military officers, and the US and

Spanish governments took power. He dismissed all elected institutions of Chávez's administration, named conservatives as ministers without including other members of the anti-Chávez coalition. He changed the name of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela back to its original name that is without the Bolivarian adjective, symbolically abolishing all of the legacies of Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution. Carmona became isolated from other members of the anti-Chávez coalition who did not support the coup d'état, and the armed forces returned Chávez to power Sunday April 14. Chavez's supporters triumphantly received him and acclaimed the recently overthrown president as the embodiment of the democratic ideal, and as a figure larger than life who overcame a *coup d'état*.

Chávez's followers organized in the Bolivarian Circles, urban land committees, and other associations had responded to the opposition's protests with counter demonstrations to defend Chávez and his Bolivarian revolution. Thousands of chavistas took to the streets on February 2002 to celebrate Chávez failed coup attempt against President Carlos Andrés Pérez. During the work stop of April Chávez's supporters guarded the presidential palace of Miraflores. After knowing that Chávez was overthrown thousand marched to Miraflores demanding to see their leader.

In Venezuela the meanings of the people were contested and became embodied in the numbers of people marching for or against Hugo Chávez. The opposition appropriated the term civil society for their organizations made up of people of relatively privileged ethnic and class backgrounds. They portrayed themselves as rational and organized citizens, the true embodiment of the democratic people. Using long-held views of the poor, they constructed Chávez's followers as primitive and uncivilized mobs, and as the antithesis of the rational pueblo. The distinction between the organized and democratic pueblo who asserted their democratic rights in marching against Chávez was counterpoised to the danger of the mobs. As Luis Duno Gottberg shows the media represented Chávez's followers as out of place when they demonstrate for their rights. They were further racialized with images that painted them as the embodiment of barbarism and as threat to civil and democratic society (GOTTBERG, 2011, p. 271-298).

Fernando Coronil shows that what was a stake during the events of the failed coup against Chavez were different interpretations of the relationships between citizens, democracy, and the natural birth-right of all Venezuelans to benefit from the nation's oil wealth. The changes in

the management structure of PDVSA were perceived by the opposition as an attack to meritocracy, and the imposition of Chávez's loyalists with the goal of monopolizing power and endangering the management of the nation's oil wealth. For his supporters, the changes in the management of PDVSA and Chávez nationalistic oil policies meant that Chávez "protected the nation from a privileged group that wanted to regain the benefits that had enjoyed in the past" (CORONIL, 2011, p. 38).

As was the case with the other insurrections analyzed in this article, "the streets rather than the legislature, the courts, and the electoral system became the principal setting of this confrontation" (ENCARNACIÓN, 2002, p. 39). Oppositional crowds aimed to symbolically and physically take over the presidential palace that was in turn guarded by Chávez's loyalists. Regardless of social class, and of their views of Chávez, Venezuelans shared a view of democracy as crowds in action. Since democratic legitimacy rests on the people, they enforced its will by attempting to take over the institutions of state power. The irony is that some members of the opposition interpreted their anti-constitutional and undemocratic actions, as acts "of democratic self-defense provoked by Chávez tirades against civil society" (ENCARNACIÓN, 2002, p. 46).

Scholars have explained the centrality of protests as a consequence of the collapse of representative institutions and the party system. Without parties aggregating the diverse interest of civil society, organizations of civil society acted directly in the defense of what they perceived as fundamental democratic rights. The government radicalized its policies, used loyal followers in counterdemonstrations, and the end result was the division of Venezuelans into two antagonistic camps. "For the government, the opposition are 'squalid', few in number and privileged; for the opposition, government supporters are 'chavistas' and 'hordes'. As such, each sector is minoritised and dehumanized" (CANNON, 2004, p. 298.).

In a polarized nation as Venezuela the Congress could not agree on one account of these episodes. For the opposition it was a "constitutional rebellion". They argued:

Only Chávez was to blame for the situation, as he had created a context of ungovernability due to his repeated infringements of the Constitution... The huge march on April 11 was peaceful, unarmed, and hence was not insurrectional, as the government maintained... The President had permitted and/or ordered the Bolivarian Circles, Armed Forces, and the National Guard to open fire on the demonstration, and hence he was the only person responsible for

their deaths. This left the Armed Forces no choice but to defend the Venezuelan people by seeking the president’s resignation in support of the civic insurrection. (CANNON, 2004, p. 295).

The government and its supporters labeled it as a *coup d’état*. They sustained that the opposition was responsible for the deaths. The march of the opposition

became insurrectional when it changed its route to the Presidential Palace of Miraflores... The events could only be termed a coup as they were planned conspiratorially with sectors of the military, business, opposition, and media involved. (CANNON, 2004, p. 295)

In a long interview with Marta Harnecker, Chávez interpreted his restoration to power as the confirmation of his strategy of leading a democratic and peaceful revolution.

If at some point on April 11 or 12 I doubted that a democratic and peaceful revolution was possible, what happened on April 13 and 14 – when an immense number of people came out into the streets, surrounding Miraflores and several army barracks, to demand my return – strongly reaffirmed my belief in that kind of revolution (HARNECKER, 2005, p. 187).

Chávez subsequently radicalized his revolution adopting 21 Century Socialism as a new model of direct democracy, and of state-led development.

Bolivia’s Revolutionary Epoch

From 1985 to 2003 Bolivia was considered to be a model of neoliberal reform and political stability. Hyperinflation that was running at 20,000 percent in 1984-85 was halted, and Bolivia’s fragmented and polarized party system was transformed. Parties had to negotiate coalition governments in the Congress. “Such a system provided strong incentives for cooperation among parties, so that even small parties could participate in building coalition governments” (MAYORGA, 2006, p. 155). By the beginning of the 21 Century the political system was widely rewarded as clientelist, corrupt, and in need of renewal. Neoliberal reforms failed to create employment, reactivate the economy,

and reduce poverty. Privatization had the perverse effect of increasing budget deficits. The Bolivian governments had to rely on external aid to pay salaries for public employees, and tried to increase revenue with plans of privatizing water, raising taxes, or exporting gas to the US via Chile.

From 2000 to 2003 Bolivia underwent a cycle of protest and political turmoil that resulted in the collapse of pacted democracy and of the neoliberal economic model (DUNKERLEY, 2007, p. 133-166; LINERA, 2004, p. 27-86; HYLTON; THOMPSON, 2007). Society was split into two coalitions that were antagonistic to each other. These coalitions had radically different economic and political projects and were based on ethnic and cultural polarities (indigenous/qaras (white) gringos), class cleavages (workers/businessmen), and regional divisions (Andean west/Amazonian crescent LINERA, 2006, p. 83).

Coalitions of rural and urban indigenous organizations, coca growers, and middle class sectors fought against water privatization, increasing taxation, the forced eradication of coca leaves, and surrendering gas reserves to multinational interests. The state increasingly relied on repression, in turn radicalizing protestors. At the end, President Gonzalo Sánchez de Losada was forced to leave Bolivia and was succeeded by his vice president Carlos Mesa. “Neither Morales nor the MAS was actively involved in these uprisings, which were instead the result of grassroots organizing” (POSTERO, 2014, p. 14). Insurgents refused to take power, and “Morales supported a constitutional exit from the crisis in 2003”. The Insurgents accomplished their goals of getting rid of the neoliberal model, and defending Bolivia’s national resources. In 2006 Evo Morales became the nation’s first indigenous president with a platform of “refounding the nation. This project was understood as decolonizing the state and strengthening the state apparatus.

The meaning of who belongs to the Bolivian people changed during these events. As in Ecuador “the people” was no longer imagined to be mono-culturally mestizo, it was understood as indigenous. The real existing “people of Bolivia”, García Linera wrote, is not just a sum of isolated individuals. It is made up of an amalgam of unions, indigenous peasant communities, federations, and so on (Linera, 2004, p. 72). The project of the MAS was for communal and direct democracy to replace Western liberal constructs. Under these governing forms, all members of the national community deliberate until they reach a consensus and a decision is made. Participation is not reduced to

voting, and representation to the delegation of power to representatives. Participation is an obligation linked to the economic, political, and ritual duties of the members of the community. Leadership is considered a duty and rotates among community members. All participants must abide by collective decisions, which are reached through long deliberations aimed at reaching consensus. Thus, individual rights are subordinated to collective rights because, “in indigenous communities democratic rules do not apply, but a form of authoritarianism based on consensus” (PACO, 2004, p. 117). Those who dissent and do not follow collective decisions are considered traitors, a crime punishable by measures such as monetary fines, ostracism, and occasionally by means of physical penalties such as whipping.

Community assemblies are undifferentiated institutional spaces where participants make decisions, administer justice, and construct authority. Representatives named at the local level that serve in higher committees are held accountable to their constituents and have to implement what has been decided by their collectivities. Some scholars contend that indigenous communities have retained the same economic, political, ritual, and insurrectionist practices that they had in pre-Hispanic times (LINERA, 2009, p. 43-44).

Entire urban indigenous neighborhoods such as those in the city of El Alto, and rural indigenous communities actively participated in the insurrections that took place between 2000 and 2003. Their tactics were to besiege cities, and to use their numerical superiority to obstruct the communication between cities (LINERA, 2004, p. 47). As Hylton and Thompson argued, during the siege, indigenous people which are the majority of the population “trespassed the spaces where they were confined showing their demographic and territorial power reducing the power of their adversaries” (HYLTON; THOMPSON, 2003, p. 11). Mobilizing entire communities and neighborhoods became effective because indigenous communities and unions are in charge of almost all social activities of their members. For example, the coca growers syndicate “controlled everything: from protest assignments – some of them had to work while other maintained the roadblocks – to income, to the dry law – they weren’t allowed to sell corn liquor during the roadblocks – and even marriage troubles” (SIVAK, 2008, p. 44).

Scholars who believed in the values of constitutional and liberal democracy interpreted the collapse of “pacted democracy” as the result of the rise of anti-systemic movements. René Mayorga, for example, wrote:

The MAS rejected outright the basic tenets of representative democracy and the market economy on the grounds that they are alien to Indian cultures. Accordingly, it attempted a radical, strongly anti-institutional strategy, dubbed “siege strategy”, aimed at blocking and destabilizing the government and the state by using both the tactics of mobilization and its veto power against government initiatives in Congress, which required a two-thirds majority (MAYORGA, 2006, p. 191).

Roberto Laserna, argues that the process of “democratic modernization” of the mid 80s and 90s was stopped by a “conservative populist movement with communitarian and statist nostalgias” (LASERNA, 2003, p. 7). Jorge Lazarte uses the expression “democracy of the streets” to describe a pattern in which “each act of collective mobilization appears to be an act of popular sovereignty”. He contends that because according to the MAS “the people” is inherently democratic (LAZARTE, 2010), these insurrections represented the purest examples of direct and communal democracy.

Differently from views of politics as the respect for procedures, Evo Morales conceived of politics as a show of power in the form of rallies that demonstrates strength in the streets and subsequent negotiations. He argues that a successful social movement and party strategy is based on the mobilization of thousands of organized supporters, and “as a sum of assemblies, negotiations with politicians and officials, and fights in the streets and roads” (SIVAK, 2008, p. 43). His view of collective action as an integral part of collective bargaining for the democratization of the state and society thus differed from normative distinctions between institutional and non-institutional collective action of Bolivian political scientist like René Mayorga, and Roberto Laserna.

In the name of democracy and the people

The events analyzed in this chapter illustrate how democracy became a term that was given different and, at times, contradictory meanings by politicians and activists alike. In the name of defending democracy, self-proclaimed defenders of democracy like Gonzalo Sánchez de Losada used the army to brutally repress demonstrations in Bolivia causing the death of 60 people during the “Gas War”(LEVITSKY; LOXTON, 2013, p. 116-7) In the name of democracy Chávez concentrated power, and polarized society into two antagonistic camps. Social movement organizations, politicians, and military officers conspired in Ecuador

and Venezuela to overthrow legally elected presidents in the name of democracy. The cacophony about democracy could be read as a symptom that, differently from the past, it had become “the only game in town”. But given its contradictory meanings it is not a surprise that, as in the past, the norms of constitutional democracy were bended to, even give military coups the appearance of legitimacy. Differently from the past the military was not asked to take power directly. But as in the past, however, the seal of approval from the military was needed to determine whether a president was seen as legitimate or not.

These events also question naïve views of civil society as necessarily democratizing. Leaders of social movements in Ecuador and Venezuela shared the instrumentalist approach to democracy of politicians. When democracy became inconvenient they had no qualms about plotting with the armed forces to orchestrate a coup. Their ambivalence toward constitutional democracy as an ideal to strive for, and as a series of norms they simultaneously bend and follow, might be explained by the fact that democracy is based on both, substantive and procedural claims. Democracy has to address social inequalities, and the democratic credentials of politicians are judged by their capacity to redistribute oil and mineral resource rent to all of the population, especially the poor. As Fernando Coronil argues for Venezuela, all citizens in these mineral resource rich nations have a birthright to enjoy its benefits. Yet democracy is simultaneously understood as following constitutional procedures. Free and open elections are the legitimate venue to become a president. When a president is not considered to be legitimate because mineral rents are not targeted to address the well being of all, but are used for the benefits of a privilege few, they are considered to be illegitimate, and they need to be ousted. Yet for a coup d'état to be successful it needs to have a constitutional aura. When actors, completely disregard the forms of liberal democracy, as they did in Venezuela, they failed. Successful coups in Ecuador were given a legal façade. Enacting the will of the people, Congress named “legal” successors.

Similarly to the insurrections analyzed by Pierre Rosanvallon, these uprisings were interpreted by actors as “stunning acts of sovereignty” and as “the mother of utopian democracy, democracy liberated from all specific institutional arrangements” (ROSANVALLON, 2008, p. 165). Indigenous communal direct democracy was portrayed as an alternative to representative forms. Communal democracy is based on the principles of horizontal practices of face-to-face interactions and deliberation, permanent consultation, imperative mandates, and rotation

of officers. Habermas (1996, p. 480-481) refers to these practices as power dissolving. These practices “allows one to think of spontaneously emergent, domination-free relationships” based on the “willingness to solve problems and coordinate action through mutual understanding”. Models of indigenous communal democracy as alternatives to liberal democracy – seen as a Western imposition – inform the utopias of some Aymara intellectuals, and of neo-anarchist activists and intellectuals such as Raúl Zibechi (2010). Yet as Habermas (1996, p. 481) sustains, “this anarchist projection of society made up of entirely horizontal networks of association was always utopian, today it is still less workable, given the regulatory needs of modern societies”.

The people spoke by taking over streets and roads, and by occupying the symbols of state power that excluded them. Crowds simultaneously created new symbols of power. The indigenous multicolored rainbow flag, and their slogans of “no lying, no stealing, and no idleness”, were used as a call for the moral regeneration of Bolivia and Ecuador. The indigenous became the new embodiment of the Bolivian and Ecuadorian people. They became mythical bearers of a new dawn based on the values denied by bourgeois individualistic global society such as uncorrupted unmediated democracy, and economic practices grounded on communal solidarity.

Mythical exaltations of the indigenous overlooked the legacies of colonialism, socioeconomic differentiations between and within indigenous communities, and their economics strategies that combine peasant production with work in the cities and for the market economy. These narratives were silent about how participation is enforced not just through consensus but also by force (COLLOREDO-MANSFELD, 2010, p. 201; ZIBECHI, 2010, p. 26).

The “people” was transformed into a mythical being. The anti-Chávez crowds made up of unionized workers, the middle class, and business entrepreneurs thought that they were the embodiment of all the Venezuelan people that marched to the presidential palace to oust the tyrant in order to reestablish democracy. They did not see that Chávez’s supporters though of themselves as the authentic *pueblo*, and of the anti-chavistas as “squalid”, few in number, and “oligarchs”, in sum the antithesis of the genuine people. Anti-government demonstrators in Bolivia and Ecuador thought of themselves as the unitary sovereign people that had the power and the will to get rid of illegitimate presidents. Their actions aimed to purified politics from vices. This is why shamans got rid of impurities of the corrupted Ecuadorean congress. The actions

of organized indigenous crowds that blockaded streets and highways were interpreted as the dawn of authentic, direct, and uncorrupted forms of immemorial indigenous democracy. According to Aymara intellectual Felix Patzi, they also signified, “the beginning of the end of representative democracy” (PATZI apud ZIBECCHI, 2010, p. 106) .

The myth of the people in action hid the diversity of interests, class, and ethnic positions of those who acted in the name of its unitary will. Habermas wrote that the people “does not comprise a subject with a will and consciousness. It only appears in the plural, and as a people, it is capable of neither decision nor action as a whole” (HABERMAS, 1996, p. 469). Yet the myth of the people in action lay at the center of these events. The people in the sense of encompassing the whole nation, and a part of the nation – the plebs – those at the bottom of society acted in unison. But as soon as it acted the question of representation came to the fore. Who represented the people? Who could speak for it? Who appropriated its name?

Because the people cannot rule themselves, some appropriate their will and claim to speak on their behalf. Paraphrasing Furet’s analysis of the French revolution, politics was a matter of establishing just who spoke for the people, and “victory was in the hands of those who were capable of occupying and keeping that symbolic position” (FURET, 1981, p. 48). Carmona failed in his attempt to unify the will of the Venezuelan people because the people he attempted to incarnate were perceived as a privileged minority. In the end, Chávez followers – the plebs – became the *populus* and claimed to be the authentic people of populism. Antonio Vargas in Ecuador attempted to speak on behalf of the unitary people. The Military High Command was not convinced, and they abandoned the rebels. Congress proclaimed Noboa as Mahuad’s legitimate successor. Differently from the other cases in Bolivia insurgents did not attempt to take power, they even restrained themselves from marching to the presidential palace to oust Gonzalo Sánchez de Losada. They followed the constitutional route to resolve the crisis, and the MAS approved naming Carlos Mesa as the new president. Their strategy was to wait to win the coming presidential election in order to proclaim Evo Morales as the new incarnation of the authentic people.

Conclusions

The events analyzed in this chapter were lived and interpreted by participants as vital moments where the future of their respective

nations and democracies were at stake. As William Sewell (1996, p. 865) argues “emotional excitement is a constitutive ingredient of many transformative actions.” Invoking the name of the sovereign people actors of different social classes and ethnic backgrounds took the streets to implement its unitary will. These events lead to the transformation of political systems as traditional political parties collapsed, and new political elites replaced old ones. Neoliberalism was abandoned for projects based on an active role of the state to redistribute natural resources rent.

Focusing on political institutions, some interpreted these events as caused by the crises of the state, and of representative institutions. When political parties do not mediate between the state and citizens, their arguments go, actors increasingly rely on non-institutional protest. The streets become the principal site for confrontations. Anti-establishment and antiparty populist outsiders can rise to power further contributing to the collapse of existing institutions. The risks of collapse are magnified in presidential systems because the president is perceived to be directly responsible. Differently from the past political instability did not lead to regime breakdown and military dictatorships, but to semi-legal forms of regime alteration by congress. The outcome of these events was the advent of “competitive authoritarian” regimes in Ecuador, Venezuela, and Bolivia. Such regimes are competitive in so far as the opposition uses elections. Yet, “competition is markedly unfair. Incumbents politicize state institutions – such as the judiciary, security forces, tax agencies, and electorate authorities – and deploy them against opponents” (LEVITSKY; LOXTON, 2013, p. 108).

An exclusive focus on political institutions tends to idealize the democratic credentials of previously existing regimes. It also fails to capture the emotions involved during these events. As this chapter shows actors felt that what was at stake was nothing less than the fate of the nation and democracy. In order to give voice to the actors, scholars and activist wrote epic narratives of the struggles of the people. In Bolivia and Ecuador sympathetic scholars wrote portraits of the insurrections as the dawn of alternative and authentic forms of indigenous, non-mediated, communal democracy. The insurrections in Bolivia and Ecuador were portrayed as democratizing events. Corrupt presidents were impeached by the actions of the crowds in the streets.

The events discussed in this chapter illustrate that if representative democracy is not rejected *tout court* the practical and normative issue

of political representation needs to be addressed. “Should the will of the people currently trying to oust the president prevail over the will of the people who cast votes in favor of the same president in the last election?” (PÉREZ-LIÑÁN, 2007, p. 211). For those defending Chávez for example, he needed to finish his term in office, whereas for those protesting he was no longer legitimate and needed to be ousted. Insurrections against elected presidents could be read as forms of popular impeachment and accountability. Yet what about the legality and legitimacy of their election for those who voted for the president? Even without addressing this normative question, the future of democratic institutions depended on how political crises were resolved. When Congress, as in Ecuador, systematically bended norms declaring that presidents were mad without medical proves, or that they abandoned power, the legitimacy and legality of the institutions of representative democracy were further jeopardized

These rebellions were lived as popular resurrections. “The people” without intermediaries took their political destinies into their own hands. During these exhilarating episodes citizens were forced to take sides, they were not allowed to be skeptical bystanders. The political became polarized and simplified into the struggle between two antagonistic and irreconcilable camps that led to what Laclau calls populist ruptures. But because politics were understood as the moral and Manichean confrontation between the virtuous people and the evil oligarchy in the streets, rivals became enemies, and the doors were opened for authoritarian appropriations of the peoples’ will. In Bolivia the strength of autonomous social movements did not allow a leader to fully incarnate the will of the people, and the power of the people was built from the bottom up. Evo Morales’s authority is bounded and constrained by the strength of autonomous social movements with whom he negotiates. In Venezuela Hugo Chávez became *el pueblo*, and all his rivals were transformed into enemies of the leader, the people, the nation, and the revolutionary process. In Ecuador, after the indigenous movement was weakened in part due to its participation in the January coup and in the government of Lucio Gutiérrez (ZAMOSC, 2007), and in the power vacuum created by the collapse of political parties and with a weak civil society, Rafael Correa became the new self-proclaimed Redeemer of the People (DE LA TORRE, 2010, p. 174-198). In Venezuela and Ecuador populists claimed to incarnate the people, while in Bolivia who speaks for “the people” is more open for contestation.

The tensions between inclusion and exclusion were illustrated during these events. On the one hand, during these insurrections common people actively participated, became politicized, and empowered by their collective actions in the streets. Participants felt part of episodes where new chapters in history were written. These insurrections, however took place in the capital and in particular geographical areas, not in the nation as a whole. In Venezuela and Ecuador the goal was to occupy the centers of power. In Bolivia and Ecuador inhabitants of major cities such as Santa Cruz and Guayaquil for example did not join demonstrations and blockades. Unwillingly insurgents excluded those who lived in provinces, reinforcing centralist patterns of state power. The exclusion of major geographic areas also questions the notion that the power of insurgents in streets is inherently democratizing.

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