Introduction

The Challenges of Constituent Power

Initially, the neighbors were not happy with the occupation.

Mérida is situated in the Venezuelan Andes. It is a colonial city and a college town. It is beautiful, temperate, and usually offers a merciful calm in comparison with the capital, Caracas. Mérida is also a divided city—politically, socially, and geographically. Its more affluent commercial and residential zones sit above a deep ravine formed by the Rio Chama. At the bottom of the ravine lies La Chamita, the working-class district physically and mentally separated from the city proper until the construction of a mass transit cable car system linked the two sides of the city. Mérida has been a center of opposition to the Bolivarian Revolution and has seen intense battles between government supporters—predominantly made up of the poor and nonwhite majority of the population—and the more affluent and whiter opposition. It was in the middle-class district of Santa Elena on the plateau that the Casa de Costurero built its experiment in *autogestión* (self-management).

In the 1970s the building was used for community development projects, but it had since fallen into disuse after being sold to the municipality. By the time the *Consejo Comunal* (communal council) "Maestro Heriberto" started considering the building as a potential location for a community resource and education center, it was only being used by drug dealers and addicts. Since 2012 members of the communal council occupied, recuperated, and transformed the abandoned building into the Casa de Costurero, a cooperative containing a library, a computer center, a community radio station, meeting spaces and classrooms, and a rooftop garden. The members of the collective painted a makeshift soccer pitch on the street in front of the Casa (a group of children will be quick to let you know if you park too close to the goal). The plaza Miranda across the street is once again a hub for the community—a place for neighbors to exchange gossip, for children to run and play, or simply a place to relax in the shade after a long day of

work. The Casa, in other words, embodies the communitarian values most celebrated by Bolivarian socialism as a grassroots experiment in remaking Venezuela into a more inclusive, egalitarian, and participatory society.

In the summer of 2014 I was visiting old friends in Mérida. As we watched a rambunctious street game in front of the Casa de Costurero, we talked about the project, and about the restive politics of Venezuela since the death of Hugo Chávez. Venezuela has long been a polarized nation, even before the former lieutenant colonel's election in 1998, but events took a decisively violent and disruptive turn after El Comandante succumbed to cancer in March of 2013. Between February and May of 2014 opposition blockades and attacks on government supporters left forty-three people dead—including protesters, government supporters, police, national guard personnel, and uninvolved bystanders. Scores more were injured and terrorized by the blockades, which caused millions of dollars in private and public property damage. The political cost of destroying any hope of reconciliation between the government and the opposition was arguably even graver still.

Looking out at the neighborhood, fully impressed by the scale of the Casa de Costurero, I asked, "Could you have done this in an opposition neighborhood?"

"*Pana*," a friend active in the collective snorted, using the familiar Venezuelan term for friend, "this *is* an opposition neighborhood. They hated us at first! Now they tolerate us."

"So you haven't converted them to the revolution?" I asked, half-jokingly.

Everyone laughed at what was taken to be my gringo naïveté. Such is Venezuela: the consensus that afternoon was that the opposition neighbors of the Casa de Costurero tolerate the collective for now. Some have even expressed gratitude for the recuperated street, the cleaned-up park, and the facilities for the neighborhood's youth—but none of the collective members present were convinced their work had won over their opposition neighbors to the Bolivarian Revolution, much less to "socialism for the twenty-first century."

Members of Casa de Costurero are in an awkward position. Surrounded by an opposition zone in an opposition-dominated town, they also often find themselves isolated from erstwhile allies among the forces of order within the Bolivarian Revolution. One of the founding members said in an interview the previous year that "it is only through the occupation and democratization of space, together with popular communication, that we can build socialism" (Faddul 2013).[1] Their aim has always been to organize at the grassroots, to develop the skills necessary for what they see as a generational battle to change Venezuela, and to make "a more humane

and egalitarian world" (Faddul 2013). They see themselves as a "nodal point," working with other collectives, communal councils, and the local and national government. However, the collective's emphasis on direct action, egalitarian participation, organizational autonomy, and bottom-up direct democracy has also brought tensions with elements of officialdom.

In one incident, representatives from the government's United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV, its abbreviation in Spanish) came to the collective asking to rent an entire floor of their three-story building. When the PSUVistas were informed that they could use the space, but could not permanently occupy it as their own (it was already in use for a radio station and educational center), they were angered. After a protracted series of debates and arguments, the PSUV set up elsewhere. Despite the fact that the Casa de Costurero could have used the money—to say nothing of the potential for favors and state resources that likely would have accompanied proximity to the party—the collective agreed that the community-building project of the Casa was more important than the all but exclusive electoral emphasis of the PSUV.

Make no mistake about it, the collective behind the Casa de Costurero are fervent and active Chavistas—a catch-all collective identity shared, sometimes uneasily, by allies of the Bolivarian Revolution. However, in the encounter with the PSUV, we glimpse just how multifaceted Chavismo can be. For the PSUV, each electoral contest marks a new and ever more pressing 'battle' in the struggle for the future of Venezuela. To lose control of the state apparatus, they contend, would signal the end of the Bolivarian Revolution. For the collective members, the Bolivarian Revolution is about building the commune, not just winning elections. In other words, the Bolivarian Revolution is driven by a constituent energy of collectives like the Casa de Costurero that exceeds the control of constituted institutions, procedures, and bureaucracies. And yet in the present conjuncture, these two aspects of the political—constituent and constituted power—cannot be separated. They tangle in a complex dialectic that drives the process forward, even at those moments when the division within the ranks of Chavismo are as wide as those between Bolivarian Revolution and the political opposition.

The example of the Casa de Costurero illustrates the promise and contradictions of the Bolivarian Revolution, a political sequence that began with the Caracazo uprising of 1989, was institutionalized with the rewriting of the constitution in 1999, and entered a seemingly terminal series of both self-made and imposed crises by 2016. Autonomous responses to the segregation of social space, the divisions between activists and their party, and the tensions and conflicts between Chavistas and the opposition all illustrate a more fundamental driving dialectic of constituent and constituted

power. This book explores this ever-unresolved dialectic through twentieth- and twenty-first century Venezuela.

Where one stands amid these tensions determines one's perspective on what, precisely, the Bolivarian Revolution is, when it began, and what it can be. For the political opposition, it is the imposition of "Castro Communism" in Venezuela, with some even suggesting that the regime in Caracas is Havana's puppet. For some in the government, the revolution begins with the election of Hugo Chávez in 1998 and the 1999 constitutional referendum. This beginning is then reaffirmed with every subsequent electoral victory, for which they mobilize with a martial discipline. For these electoral Bolivarians, triumphs in the 2004 recall and wins for the president in 2006 and 2012 highlight watershed moments along the road to "socialism for the twenty-first century." For many collectives like the Casa de Costurero, the revolution began with the rebellion against neoliberalization in 1989, the aftermath of which saw self-organized communities of the poor and excluded redefine the practice, possibility, and common sense of politics in Venezuela.

Much more than examples of a purely local phenomenon, or a flash of idealistic voluntarism butting against the sober conservatism of common sense, these later interpretations of constituent and constituted power bespeak a deeper confrontation on the meaning and organization of the political. Inspired by these interpreters, this book contributes a critical political theory of constituent power drawn from the material realities—the uneven negotiations, the emergent subjectivities, the historically entrenched lines of exclusion and common sense—of politics in Venezuela. As concepts and ways of interpreting the ebb, flow, and contradictions of collective life, neither constituent nor constituted power are unique to Venezuela. However, each takes on new meanings in the context of neoliberalization in the 1990s and the post-neoliberal and postliberal experiments of the Bolivarian Revolution in the twenty-first century. Usually, constituent power is identified with the horizontal, creative, inclusive, and transformative force of collective life. It is the democratic principle in action; it resists inequality, hierarchy, and exclusion in all forms. It does not take no for an answer. Constituted power is more vertical, routinized, and rationalized. Even in ostensibly progressive cases, it limits constituent power through institutions and procedures in order to extend it beyond its immediate expression. However, once separated from the constituent moment, constituted power becomes increasingly self-referential. It becomes invested in the "reason of state" that can, and usually does, sacrifice democracy while purporting to save it.

Viewed through the lens of this fundamental conflict, the Bolivarian government is the *effect* rather than the *cause* of a social revolution. Chávez, Maduro, and the governments they head represent forms of constituted

power that must by definition rely upon the constituent forces—like the Casa de Costurero—that remain beyond their control (Beasley-Murray 2010, 127). They are apparatuses of capture—perhaps a virtuous capture, one that seeks to enhance and ally itself to constituent power, but capture nonetheless. Rather than denounce such an arrangement as unauthentically revolutionary, and against what George Ciccariello-Maher (2013) has described as the "blinkered horizontalism" of much contemporary writing on political change in Latin America that condemns the state form *tout court* (17), a more nuanced analysis of experiments in state form is called for. Such an analysis looks to the encounter, the push and pull, and the exodus and capture of constituent power in its relation to the constituted, Bolivarian, order to better grasp the changing significance of authority, citizenship, and politics.

The Bolivarian Revolution thus exceeds an accumulation of the effects of networks of autonomous practices—such as communal councils, urban land committees, collective resource management, and worker-managed enterprises (Azzellini 2015). It can be seen at a more general and intimate level in a budding political culture that explicitly seeks to close the gap between state and civil society so precious to the liberal tradition of the North Atlantic (Valencia 2015). In this, the push by autonomous actors to move beyond the conventional mediations and representations of constituted power has provided new spaces for political creation—practices of direct democracy and substantive social citizenship that have served as touchstones for activists elsewhere in the Americas and the world (Ellner 2014; Raby 2006). But these developments have also been uneven, and moments of vulnerability and manipulation by entrenched bureaucrats and elites continue to challenge attempts to recreate the state "from below" (Fernandes 2010, 234; Motta 2013). Corruption and bureaucratic intransigence should not be read as signs of failure or the folly of attempting social transformation in the developing world. They rather illustrate a more abiding aspect of the political that has for too long been obscured: politics is the result of a dialectic between constituent and constituted power, not an effect of well-designed institutions.

This is to a greater or lesser degree a truth of *all* modern republics that seek legitimacy in a rule "by, for, and of the people," popular sovereignty, or, in Anglo-American parlance, the "social contract." In the North Atlantic tradition, however, the potentially destabilizing effects of democratic excess are usually glorified at a safe distance as a part of civic identity but condemned in practice (Colón-Ríos 2012; Negri 1992; Spång 2014). The contemporary Venezuelan experience breaks from this trend, pitting the inherent tension between constituent and constituted power as the quotidian essence of the Bolivarian political experiment rather than something to be wished away by prevailing limits of common sense.

Solo el pueblo salva al pueblo—only the people can save the people—is a popular slogan, a history lesson, and a political culture in twenty-first-century Venezuela. It reminds us that power ascends from the people and that regimes, institutions, and politicians are the beneficiaries rather than sources of their constituent energies. Only the people can save the people is more than a tautology; it is both a statist valorization of the constituent and a warning that constituent power always and necessarily exceeds state power.

At its most general, this book makes three interventions. First, it contends that the contemplation of constituent power produces an unavoidable question to any democratic conceptualization or practice of the political. Constituent power asks how we will live together. It asks how we will organize shared life; it asks us how open we are to others, and to ourselves. It asks how much inequality, and what sort of limits to our boundless potential, can we force ourselves to *tolerate*. A praxis oriented by constituent power incessantly challenges the settled boundaries of our present selves; it centers on transformation and shapes the civic and social imaginary, the economy, and indeed, the concrete worlds of the cities we inhabit.

Second, the book illustrates a unique Latin American and Venezuelan approach to the question of constituent power dating back to the Independence wars of the early nineteenth century. In this tradition, constituent power is seen as linked to the constituted powers it founds in a generative and progressive dialectic. This relationship emphasizes (re)generation, experimentation, and cultivation over containment. Here constituent power is not a problem to be wished away by the consolidated apparatuses of state power. It is, rather, a constant spur to increase the scope and impact of collective democratic life. These Latin American approaches challenge North Atlantic and liberal understandings of constituent power that relegate it to the prehistory of constituted orders, or to aspects of a citizenship that has been contained in the representative organs of consolidated state and market apparatuses.

Finally, *Only the People Can Save the People* illustrates how the Bolivarian Revolution complicates this very same dialectic it uniquely recognizes. It examines the problems—either "growing pains" or contradictions—that constituent power encounters when constituted powers claim to be its ally. The book asks, to what extent are the institutions and routines of modern, state, and constituted power *inherently* opposed to the expression of constituent power? Or, is this binary only inevitable from within the contractual limits of state and civil society assumed in the liberal tradition? Even if this is only suggestively the case, how might the relationship between constituent and constituted power shift in the contemporary postliberal moment in which, according to Benjamin Arditi (2008), the conventional

procedures and subject positions of modern representative democracy are complemented, challenged, and supplanted by direct, supranational, redistributionist, and more collective political experiments?

In response to these questions, this book explores the often-subterranean existence and implications of constituent power for political thought in the early twenty-first century. It asks the reader to *rethink constituent power*. That is to say, I hope not only to reconsider the assumptions, binaries, and consequences of constituent power given different historical and geopolitical coordinates, but also to initiate anew the challenge set to us by the realities of constituent power.

The red thread uniting these considerations is that constituent power should not, cannot, be read as a fixed *thing*. It is rather a capacity, and an ever-present potential of collective life. It is often easier to read in the responses it inspires among the forces of reaction, but it persists nonetheless. As such, an account of constituent power will never be a straightforward affair—perhaps nowhere more so than in contemporary Venezuela.

Venezuela's Long Twentieth Century

The modern Venezuelan state can be seen as a by-product of the discovery and extraction of petroleum in the early twentieth century. Oil provided the financial and political resources for the central state to consolidate its sovereignty over the national territory—a sovereignty that had been fragmented since independence from Spain was won in 1823. Before oil, Venezuela had an agrarian economy dominated by landed interests and local *caudillos*—strongmen who commanded large armies and, often, intense personal loyalty from their followers (Lynch 1992; Sanoja Obediente 2011).

The last in a long of string of Andean *caudillos* to seize the presidency, Juan Vicente Gómez (1857–1935) had the good fortune of ruling over Venezuela when commercial oil extraction in the Maracaibo basin began in earnest in 1914. The president used his position vis-à-vis a queue of foreign oil companies—and the national powers they represented—to secure foreign recognition of his rule and to subdue any lingering internal challenges to his all but absolute sovereignty. It also allowed him to cultivate a loyal *comprador* class of newly urbanized elites to counter the power of rural oligarchs. Under Gómez, Venezuela set out on path of managed urbanization, modernization, and economic growth and perfected a form of centralized control in an almost "magically" powerful state (Coronil 1997; DiJohn 2009; Tinker Salas 2009).

In addition to these vertical aspects of sovereignty as state power, oil also provided the opportunity for the horizontal formation of a shared identity

among petroleum workers. As Miguel Tinker Salas (2009) notes, prior to the establishment of the oil industry,

> Venezuelans had no established tradition of internal migration. Not since the wars of independence in the first two decades of the nineteenth century had Venezuela witnessed a significant movement of people. Moreover, a history of civil wars during the nineteenth century had accentuated regional differences. Most early laborers arrived at the Lake of Maracaibo with much trepidation. For many the journey represented the first time they had ventured from the familiar surroundings of their homes. Thrust into large bachelors' quarters, work sites, and villages, they came into contact with people who, although Venezuelan, were not always familiar; the Maracuchos [people from Maracaibo] spoke with a different accent, the Andeans seemed more formal and reserved, and the Easterners were more direct and outspoken. The migrants did not eat all the same foods, enjoy the same music, dress the same, or even pray to the same saints . . . at one level the new encounters initiated a process of recognition, crucial to state formation and nationhood, but at another it produced frictions as regional differences emerged. (77)

From *La ruta petrolera*—the oil circuit—arose the encounters and frictions necessary for something like a Venezuelan imagined community to emerge. Venezuelans came to appreciate the geographical extent and diversity of the country to which they had been assigned by accident of birth and experienced their first encounters with human differences subordinated within this shared identity. However, emergent notions of nationhood and an increasingly mobile population also sparked concern among elites and contributed to latent racial hierarchies already established within the centralizing body politic.

Even in these early, centralizing, and top-down moments of the modern Venezuelan state one can detect a nagging anxiety around constituent power. The positivism associated with Venezuela's twentieth-century dictators started from the assumption that the "effective constitution" of Venezuelans—determined by their racial and cultural makeup, geography, and colonial history—destined the country to be forever "backward" and hence incapable of the modern representative democracy they saw in the North Atlantic (Tinoco Guerra 2010, 101; Bautista Urbaneja 2013, 77). The best form of government—arguably perfected in the midcentury dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1948–1958)—was thus determined to be developmentalist authoritarianism. No other form of government, it was believed, could maintain order and peace while transforming the population—via a range

of measures from tutelage to substitution and eugenics—into properly modern citizens (Castillo D'Imperio 2003; Herrera Salas 2005, 75–76). Beyond the pseudosciences of developmentalism, however, these sorts of political expressions bespeak a fear of losing control on the part of elites. They also point to a perceived need to rationalize the exclusionary reality of what would be proclaimed after 1958 to be the region's only "consolidated democracy" (Ellner and Tinker Salas 2007).

Democratic Venezuela began after the fall of Pérez Jiménez in 1958 with the signing of the Puntofijo pact between center left and right political parties Democratic Action (AD, its abbreviation in Spanish) and COPEI. However, the "fourth republic" or Puntofijo years, were no less exclusionary or repressive for the population at large. Protest movements of students, peasants, and urban slum dwellers were violently repressed by the civilian governments of the Puntofijo parties, killing many, pushing some into exile, and still others into a clandestine guerrilla campaign that would last until the 1970s (Ciccariello-Maher 2013; Ellner 2008 Gómez García 2014; Velasco 2015). While oil booms, especially in the 1970s, granted the state an ability to smooth over some of the social conflicts that accompany extreme inequality, the flood of petrodollars also intensified already unfathomably high levels of corruption, government inefficiency, public scandal, and a general confidence deficit of citizens in relation to the state (Buxton 1999; Coronil 1997; Mommer 2003). By the time of Venezuela's currency devaluation on its "Black Friday" (February 18, 1983) the country had gone from one of the region's richest economies to one of its most indebted, and the Puntofijo system was already in a state of advanced decay (López Maya 2005).

Neoliberalization and the popular responses will be discussed in greater detail in the coming chapters. For now, it will suffice to say that the Caracazo uprising of February 27, 1989, blew open the Puntofijo order and began the construction of a new political rationality in Venezuela. The *partidocracia* (partyocracy—a neologism coined to describe the Puntofijo system) could not survive a government crackdown against massive anti-austerity protests that left as many as three thousand Venezuelans dead over the course of three bloody days. In the aftermath, neoliberal economic and political reforms continued in a piecemeal fashion—telecommunications were privatized in 1992 but the proposed *apertura* (opening) of the oil industry never fully materialized—and public trust in government continued to plummet. In 1992 there were two attempted coups, both of which cited the government crackdown in the Caracazo and market reforms as their proximate causes. Shockingly, both attempts were met with widespread public support, and the leader of the first, a young lieutenant colonel named Hugo Chávez,

was catapulted to national fame when he made his televised surrender on February 4, 1992. In 1993 the last president of the Puntofijo system, Carlos Andrés Pérez, widely identified with economic shock therapy, violent repression, and ever-worsening, endemic corruption, was impeached on charges of corruption.

Just as importantly, the collapse at Venezuela's commanding heights in the 1990s was matched and exacerbated by spikes in protest and collective action on a scale never before seen in the country's history. Neighborhood associations, unions, and peasant networks decried the loss of subsidies, state protections, and declining services throughout the decade. Particularly among the most marginalized sectors of the population, protest transitioned into mutual aid as an ethic of self-reliance and resistance spread out of both necessity and innovation. People needed novel solutions to fight police brutality; to gain access to basic services like water, electricity, and waste removal; and to find work to support their families. In the aftermath of failed developmentalism, they increasingly sought out nonstate and nonmarket avenues to do so.

By the time Chávez was released from prison in 1994 (the newly elected president at the time, Rafael Caldera,[2] had made the release of the popular rebel leader a key promise of his campaign), a new mode of politics was already in motion. Chávez capitalized on this and staked his political future on the need for a new constitution. He named the party established for his electoral aims the Movimiento Quinta República (Fifth Republic Movement, MVR) and built on his status as a political outsider from a humble background, who had literally risked his life to pull the country out of neoliberalism, to win election in 1998. Immediately upon taking office, Chávez initiated the process of convoking a constituent assembly, which after an open process of public debate, was approved in 1999.

The next decade saw Venezuela transformed as the tensions between constituent and constituted power—and the conflict between the newly empowered majority of the population and old guard elites—intensified at every possible turn. Between 2002 and 2004 the opposition repeatedly attempted to remove the president by any extraparliamentary means at their disposal. An attempted coup was reversed by mobilizations from below in April 2002, as was a campaign of economic sabotage led by the management of the national oil industry, PDVSA, between December 2002 and February 2003. Violent street blockades known as *guarimbas* sought to create ungovernability and destabilize the government throughout 2004 and 2005. In 2004, Chávez handily won an attempt to recall him spearheaded by the United States–funded nongovernmental organization (NGO) Súmate. In 2005 the opposition boycotted National Assembly elections, citing fraud

Figure 1. "All Motors at Maximum Speed to Bolivarian Socialism! First motor, The Enabling Laws: A direct path to socialism; Second Motor, Constitutional Reform: A socialist rule of law; Third Motor, Morality and Enlightenment: Education with Socialist values; Fourth Motor, The New Geometry of Power: The socialist reordering of the nation's geopolitics; Fifth Motor: Explosion of Communal Power: Protagonistic, Revolutionary, and Socialist Democracy!"[3]

before campaigning had even ended—a claim rejected by international observers. Chávez easily won reelection again in 2006 on a campaign that emphasized the need to build socialism for the twenty-first century.

At his inauguration in 2007, Chávez cited the need to "accelerate" the Revolution, and outlined five steps or "motors" toward the realization of Bolivarian socialism. The five motors were depicted as step-by-step instructions for how to achieve what the president outlined. The first motor, the enabling law, allowed Chávez to rule by decree for a set period of time (Chávez 2014, 262). The second, the constitutional reform, was intended to make the gains of the previous six years permanent, and to elevate organs like the Bolivarian Missions and the communal councils to a constitutionally mandated status. Intimately linked to the first, Chávez admitted that the 1999 Constitution had been "born in the middle of a storm" and needed to be adapted to the growing demands of constituent power (263). In this way, Chávez also suggested an understanding of the constitution that was in perpetual motion, constantly revising and reforming itself—a living and participatory document more than a social contract or a transfer of popular sovereignty to institutional order (266) (the *reforma* will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 2). The third motor, *moral y luces* sought the development of an explicitly socialist educational system that would better prepare Venezuelans for the future. The reference is to Simón Bolívar's proposed constitution as outlined in his address to the congress of Angostura in 1819. The state-citizen dynamic is here envisioned as a constant pedagogical project, one not limited to classrooms, but rather an all-encompassing and collective project of social, economic, and political education (267). The fourth motor, the new geometry of power was to be a radical overhaul of the political system, "a new way of distributing political, economic, social, and military power" across national space (268). The goal here was to decentralize power from the capital city and to displace the entropy-prone institutions of representative democracy with local and regional councils of autonomous socialist collectives. Finally, the fifth motor, the explosion of communal power was to be the realization of the new society and the definitive replacement of the old order with a more just, inclusive, and participatory state of affairs. Citing Antonio Negri, Chávez argued that constituent power circulates through space as a constantly transformative force, a "multitude in revolution" (269). This communal power, the president continued, would fundamentally reshape the nation, as the representative state would be progressively replaced by a federation of communal councils (271).

Most immediately striking in the five motors outline is how it all but completely inverts how politics had progressed to that moment in Venezuela. Rather than start from the expression of constituent power, as had been the case with the Caracazo and throughout the 1990s, the 2007 roadmap places the executive at the beginning and center of the revolutionary process.

Autonomous social networks created the political and social space into which the Chávez government moved. The five motors reverse this dynamic, asserting that it is states and institutions that create the spaces in which citizens operate.

After the failure of the second motor, the constitutional reform, in late 2007, the Bolivarian Revolution attempted to consolidate its gains rather than to follow, as it had initially promised, the call to "deepen" the revolution issued by some of its supporters that rejected the *reforma*. As some sectors of the opposition finally accepted that any challenge to Chávez would have to take place through the ballot box—eventually resulting in the Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (Democratic Unity Roundtable, MUD) still others returned to the street. During this time an emboldened student movement—again, often funded by Northern NGOs and widely celebrated in the US and European media as fighters for freedom against socialism—began to agitate for an end to the regime in both highly polished media stunts and violent confrontations with the police and government supporters.

By the time Chávez announced in mid-2011 that he had undergone multiple surgeries for cancer, the Bolivarian Revolution was actively courting the participation of the middle classes, even as it expanded its investments in the poor majority of Venezuelans through ambitious new social programs and infrastructure projects. In the presidential campaign of 2012, in which Chávez faced off with Henrique Capriles Radonski, the governor of Miranda, the latter campaigned not on a return to the Fourth Republic and market orthodoxy, but rather on a platform that criticized the government for soaring crime rates and promised to replace bombastic Chavismo with a more tempered, sober, and business-friendly social democracy of the Brazilian stripe. Capriles, that is to say, minimized any threat his administration might pose to the Misiones Bolivarianas (Bolivarian Missions) and other popular programs and effectively promised to replace Chávez with the more diplomatic Lula da Silva. Few believed him, and he lost by some eleven points to Chávez in the October 2012 ballots (he was however able to close that gap to just over 1.5% the following year when he faced Chávez's successor, Nicolás Maduro).

Chávez died in March 2013 and elections were held, as mandated in the constitution, a month later. Since then, Venezuela has been rocked by a string of violent antigovernment protests as the price of oil halved and then halved again, reaching a low of $28.50 USD per barrel in January 2016. As opposed to the recession triggered by the collapse of US mortgage-backed securities in 2008, however, Saudi Arabia's unilateral 2014 decision to flood the market with cheap crude and the corrections in the Chinese economy in 2015 put Venezuela in a uniquely precarious structural position.[4]

By 2016, these dynamics led to an all but complete economic collapse. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimated that Venezuela would reach 720% inflation during that calendar year. Widespread shortages in basic foodstuffs, medicine, and consumer goods triggered riots through the country. The opposition capitalized on the overlapping political, economic, and social crises and pushed for a presidential recall referendum.

The Maduro government responded to economic implosion at home, isolation from international financial networks, and deeply embedded corruption and ineptitude within the government by ceding increasing authority to the military. While Bolivarianism had always been built on a civic-military alliance (Chávez 2013; Garrido 2007) and was wary of liberalism's insistence on the separation of powers, by 2016 the situation seemed to have turned. Rather than a practical criticism and alternative to the notion that the institutions of the modern nation-state are neutral, and rather than the deepening of a protagonistic dynamic in which the state and movements coordinate efforts toward a common horizon of social transformation, the Maduro administration's moves in 2016 sought to divorce constituent from constituted power.

The post-Chávez years will be explored in greater detail in what is to come. For now, it is important to recognize that while the central concern of *Only the People Can Save the People* revolves around the dynamics of constituent and constituted power, and of the primacy of the former in relation to the latter, the impact of Chávez on politics in Venezuela cannot be overemphasized. The transition from neoliberalization to Bolivarianism to whatever follows has been punctuated by crises, struggles, advances, and setbacks. Without question, the death of Chávez was one of the most severe. However, even without such a singular force on the scene, the challenges facing the Bolivarian process and by the constituent powers that drive it remain the same: How can, should, and will collective life be organized? And, just as pressingly, what is, what can be, the role of the state in the pursuit of a better world?

Bringing the State Back in . . . but What Kind?

I first moved to Venezuela in early 2007 to study the role of the state in struggles for social and political justice. Significant parts of my generation of left-oriented scholarship and activism turned away from the state as a viable tool for pursuing social change. In Latin America, the memory of dictatorships and death squads had no time to fade before neoliberalization: the democratic state, like its authoritarian predecessor, became a tool for mass impoverishment, police repression, and the siphoning of collective wealth to

local elites and Northern financial institutions (Robinson 2007). For many in the anti- or "alter-globalization" movements of the 1990s, states were seen to be as much the enemy as the multinational corporations they ostensibly served (see, for example, Hardt and Negri 2000 and Holloway 2002 for perhaps the most characteristic theorizations of anti-statist tendencies in the "alter-globalization" movements). For others, the state was too rigid, too disciplinary, too rationalized, and too attached to modernization to offer anything other than disaster (Scott 1998). Against concerns that these criticisms of the state form and of actually existing states might correspond to the wave of recalibrated liberalism being exported from its first experiments in Pinochet's Chile, Reagan's United States, and Thatcher's England (Harvey 2005), the left-wing anti-statism of the 1990s insisted on the need to press forward, and especially beyond any nostalgia for the "golden age" of postwar capitalism in the North Atlantic (Hardt and Negri 2000; Hobsbawm 1995). Theorizations and experimentations with new forms of praxis in the 1990s emphasized autonomy and dispersal, conjunctural coordination, and a creative expansion of identities and intensities rather than the state-oriented antagonisms of twentieth-century Marxist-Leninism (Colectivo Situaciones 2002).

Here Latin America was an often-influential, if spectral, presence in my and many others' political formation (Azzellini and Sitrin 2014). There was for example Fèlix Guattari and Suely Rolnik's (2008) investigation of the new unionism of the Partido dos Trabalhadores in Brazil. Unlike traditional trade unionism, the PT operated across layers of statist and non-statist mobilization during the transition from authoritarian rule in the early 1980s, traversing traditional boundaries of state, civil society, and economy. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's (1985) post-Marxist rereading of Gramsci in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* was always arguably haunted by the former's political formation in Peronist Argentina (Beasley-Murray 2012). The Zapatista rebellion of Chiapas, Mexico, with its media savvy, postmodern poetry, direct democracy, and rejection of the modern state form was a constant influence and reference for the anti-statist Marxist Left (Hardt and Negri 2000; Holloway 2002) and the Latin American philosophers of liberation (Dussel 2006). By the late 1990s, the World Social Forum—first convened in Porto Alegre, Brazil—emphasized that the future of anti-systemic agitation would have to take place through autonomous and conjuncture-dependent networks (a "movement of movements") that many hoped would replace rather than capture state power (Fisher and Ponniah 2003).

In all these cases—and this is only a very partial list, to which can be added feminist, subalternist, and postcolonial criticisms—we increasingly saw the state as irredeemably considered suspect and inextricably linked to the

horrors of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Neoliberalization brought with it a reconfiguration of the state form: less welfare, more police; less social rights, more privatization; less national development, more financial capital; less public space, more surveillance and fences. However, against whiggish accounts of globalization and economic reforms that heralded the age of the "shrinking state," for the majority of the population, neoliberalization meant more ubiquitous forms of social control. As Wendy Brown (2003) would have it, neoliberalization entailed a mode of governance, "encompassing but not limited to the state, and one which produces subjects, forms of citizenship and behavior, and a new organization of the social." In sum, neoliberalization entailed a new regime of governmentality rather than the end of power relations first perfected by the modern state—especially for those who came to depend most on "the public" in the twentieth century. Many on the left—to say nothing of the right—were thus skeptical when the Bolivarian Revolution as a *governmental* project gave state-led developmentalism a second life in the first years of the twenty-first century.

In similar fashion, the Bolivarian Revolution's reintroduction of socialism into the lexicon of the global left seemed a dog-eared throwback for many in the post–Cold War anticapitalist and "alter-globalization" milieus. These movements were often as critical of the "actually existing" socialisms of the Soviet bloc and the failures of national liberation movements as they were antagonistic to the (neo)liberal representative democracies of the late twentieth century (Hardt and Negri 1994, 2004; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Scott 1998). Actually existing socialism of the twentieth century had been replaced by the actually existing democracies of the twenty-first. While the cynicism of the new age and an emerging populist neoliberalism was duly noted—outsourcing state functions to a legion of enterprising NGOs, microfinanciers, and the cult of celebrity around billionaire philanthropists, for example—few had the stomach to look to the socialist traditions of Mexico in 1910, Russia in 1917, China in 1949, Algeria in 1954, or Cuba in 1959 for inspiration on where next to turn.

When Hugo Chávez announced in 2005 that Venezuela was in the process of building "socialism for the twenty-first century," and previously, when he and other officials in the government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela[5] started quoting Mao Tse-tung on the role of the military in revolutionary society ("like a fish in water"), many analysts and activists—myself included—were doubtful. There were and remain concerns linking any military involvement in politics with dictatorship and human rights abuses, concerns that have preoccupied surveys of Latin American democracy since the 1980s (Hellinger 2011; Millet, Holmes, and Pérez 2009). This concern can also be seen in other, ostensibly unrelated areas of Latin American studies, such as the literature on presidentialism, decentralization, and

institutional design (Eaton 2004; Mainwaring and Shugart 1997). Anxieties about any potential return to authoritarian military rule have thus far proved unfounded, even with the increasing militarization of the state apparatus by 2016. What has instead occurred in Venezuela since 1998, and which has, to varying degrees, spread throughout the South American continent, has been a rejection of the neoliberal model in favor of a renewed belief that governments have an obligation to provide for the welfare of their citizens and to intervene in and direct economies accordingly. While this rejection of neoliberalism has yet to bloom into a more coherently recognizable anticapitalism (Coronil 2011, 238; Leiva 2008), and while the price fluctuations of primary product exports to China has some worried about a new dependency (González-Vicente 2012; Jenkins 2012), the range and ambition of postliberal experimentation cannot be denied, particularly in Venezuela (Arditi 2008; Escobar 2010).

The matter at hand since the 1990s has been one of forging constituted institutions capable of responding to the challenge, example, and activity of constituent power. Among this book's other aims, I hope also to illustrate how the Bolivarian government's record has often been quite mixed in this regard. This has not always meant failure or betrayal of constituent power. Rather, I suggest that while the pursuit by constituted power to adequately reflect its constituent core will always fail—in Venezuela or anywhere else in the republican world—these failures can themselves be productive. By its nature constituent power always exceeds the constituted powers it founds. The book's wager—encapsulated in its title, *Only the People Can Save the People*—is that the only way to force good failures from bad situations is to calibrate these two core aspects of collective life as closely to one another as possible. Such a recalibration allows for constituent power to respond to "fetishized" expressions of constituted power that have become entropic, self-referential, and, at their extremes, antagonistic to the constituent powers that found them (Dussel 2006, 40–47). Finally, recognition that only the people can save the people gives the lie to modern liberal constitutionalism's pretensions toward permanence; it insists constituent power be more a daily practice than a limit case of normal political life. Constituent power requires a constituent republic, not a liberal state (Negri 1996; Virno 1996). This is what Joel Colón-Ríos (2012) has proposed as a "weak constitutionalism" that sees constituent power as an opportunity rather than a threat, in which citizens approach the constitutional order as a collective work in progress rather than monolithic and eternal institutions (155). The task for the Bolivarian Revolution as a constituent project is to remain tireless in its search for a "weak constitutionalism" that doesn't fade into a simple, uninspiring reformism or engage in the revisionist doublespeak of sculpting virtue from necessity.

Overview

The book unfolds over the course of five chapters, each exploring an encounter with constituent power in twenty-first-century Venezuela. Chapter 1 utilizes a comparative theoretical perspective to make the argument for a distinctly Venezuelan approach to the question of constituent power that dates back to the independence wars of the nineteenth century. Through a study of the Bolivarian Revolution's "three roots"—El Libertador Simón Bolívar; his teacher, Simón Rodríguez; and the mid-nineteenth-century radical peasant leader Ezequiel Zamora—the chapter traces both contemporary official renderings of these nineteenth-century figures as well as their subterranean and uncontrollable effects. Whereas North Atlantic approaches—and specifically the traditions of English and French liberalism, and later, of Carl Schmitt's consideration of the relation of constituent power to sovereignty—are all but unified in their anxiety about and their push to contain expressions of constituent power, in Venezuela we see a much more collaborative approach characterized by generation, cultivation, and experimentation. It is this tradition that is most appreciably at play in twenty-first-century Venezuela.

Chapter 2 explores the consequences for political thought of the Caracazo, an uprising and crackdown in 1989 that many contend is the year zero of the Bolivarian Revolution. Here the Caracazo is read as an event that opens into an established order (the Puntofijo system), exposes the exclusionary truth of what had been celebrated as a consolidated liberal democracy, and, most importantly, generates the new forms of political subjectivity that have since shaped Venezuela. In conversation with French philosopher Alain Badiou, I contend that the Caracazo signals an absolute rupture with a constituted ordering of politics, society, and economy. The truth of events, however, are only ever realized in their aftermath. The chapter thus traces an arc from the Caracazo, to the protagonism and *autogestión* that followed it, to the troubled attempts to capture constituent power in the party form with the creation of the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (United Socialist Party of Venezuela, PSUV). Against the all-too-easy conclusion that controversies around the PSUV and its seemingly irreversible descent from a party of protagonists to a centralized electoral machine analysis of event and—I almost said against—constituent power illustrates the degree to which both categories lend themselves to unsatisfyingly mystical territories.

Chapter 3 responds to these difficulties in an analysis of collective subjectivity through a reading of two key references for Bolivarian theorizations of the concept: Italian autonomist Marxist Antonio Negri

and Argentine-Mexican philosopher Enrique Dussel. The chapter argues that the experience of the Bolivarian Revolution calls for a third position somewhere between the raw ungovernability of Negri's multitude—a social force that defies any attempt to subjectivize or contain it—and Dussel's pueblo—which hews much more closely to populist conceptualizations of an organic people tied to representative institutions and leaders. In its attempts to sculpt a pueblo from a multitude, the Bolivarian Revolution presents itself as the realization or government of an original ungovernability. However, as the chapter concludes, this labor is by necessity constant; it is only from the perspective of *processes* rather than the end product of transformation that the political sequence in Venezuela since the Caracazo can be considered a *revolution* rather than a *state*.

Chapter 4 expands these social and political treatments of constituent power by examining its effects on the built environment, with special focus on the city of Caracas and urban transportation infrastructures. Through an engagement with right to the city movements and critiques, this chapter examines constituent power as having physical as well as civic and theoretical consequences. This poses a paradox, however, in terms of scale and substance: large-scale infrastructure developments require more authority and capital to execute than can usually be seen in the normal, quotidian expression of constituent power. Moreover, projects like the expansion of subway systems or the construction of housing blocks are by their very nature *concrete* to a greater extent than normally allowed for in thinking around constituent power as an effervescent and episodic expression of democratic potential. The chapter concludes by outlining the theoretical implications of this paradox for distinctly Bolivarian approaches to constituent power in the newly constrained global economic context that has prevailed since 2014.

Chapter 5 examines the relationship of the opposition to constituent power. It tracks changes in the opposition's strategy and discourse from the extraparliamentary violence of the early Chávez years to a rebranding as liberal democrats after 2010. After examining the economic and political proposals of this latter opposition, the chapter then moves to an analysis of democratic theory and its limits for thinking about politics in Venezuela. This critical look at democracy and democratic theory illustrates the extent to which the opposition can—and cannot—be considered a likely vector of constituent power against an increasingly isolated and autoreferential Bolivarian state.

In the conclusion I return to more solidly theoretical ground by considering the composition of constituent power as a force of the political in the aftermath of neoliberal restructuring. Put most bluntly, in the context

of the failed promises of twentieth-century liberalism, constituent power offered a powerful critique of inequality and exclusion. As a response to neoliberal restructuring in Venezuela in the 1990s, constituent power occupied the vacuum left by a retreating and delegitimized state. Hugo Chávez was the beneficiary rather than the cause of this situation, and the Bolivarian Revolution as a statist project that began with his election in 1998 should be read as responses to the crises of neoliberalism and the expression of constituent power. But, the question remains, how will—or can—constituent power respond to the crises of the twenty-first century? If the Bolivarian state under Hugo Chávez recognized and emphasized its debt to constituent power, even going so far as to encourage its autonomous development and expression, what sort of space remains open for constituent power as a position of critique and constitution in the present, "after" Chávez, and "after" liberalism? *Only the People Can Save the People* concludes by examining the potentials of a constituent power freed from both its position as subterranean criticism of reigning liberalism and animating motor of a statist project that claims to represent it.

This then is a book about the innovations, frustrations, and challenges of power in twenty-first-century Venezuela. It is a book about constituent and constituted power, of new social subjects struggling to redefine the role and composition of states and institutions, and it is about the difficulty of building alternatives to market democracy after globalization. In other words, this book is not just about Venezuela and the Bolivarian Revolution; its questions on the nature of democracy, revolution, citizenship, and political identity can be asked of societies coping with the aftermaths of neoliberal structural adjustment throughout Latin America and the world.