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Source: *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Feb., 2003), pp. 117-137

Published by: [Cambridge University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3875580>

Accessed: 09-02-2016 19:54 UTC

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The Venezuelan *Caracazo* of 1989: Popular Protest and Institutional Weakness*

MARGARITA LÓPEZ MAYA

Abstract. 27 February 1989 saw a popular revolt break out in Venezuela which was to escalate dramatically. Both Caracas and most of the main and secondary cities of the country were the scene of barricades, road closures, the stoning of shops, shooting and widespread looting. This article describes the events occurring during the *Caracazo* or *Sacudón*, as the episode is known, in order to show the key role played by the weakness of a set of social and political institutions in the violent forms of collective action that prevailed. This data, on a comparative basis, may enrich our understanding of other similar uprisings in the region and worldwide.

Introduction

On 27 February 1989 a popular revolt, which was to escalate dramatically, broke out in Venezuela. Both Caracas and most of the main and secondary cities of the country witnessed barricades, road closures, the burning of vehicles, the stoning of shops, shooting and widespread looting. The revolt lasted five days in Caracas, slightly less in the rest of the country. The cost in material and human losses was very high; the deaths, numbering almost four hundred, were largely of poor people resident in the capital.

The unusual and unexpected violence of this occurrence has given rise to a number of interpretations. This literature is primarily concerned with explaining the direct or indirect causes which brought the poor and middle classes of Venezuela out on to the streets, yet many exceptional features of the disturbance remain unaddressed.¹ For instance, why did it last so long? Why did it attain such levels of violence? Why was it centred on targets such

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* The author wishes to thank Alan Angell of St Antony's College, Oxford, as well as the *JLAS* referees of this article for their valuable remarks. She would also like to express her gratitude to John Wainwright and Ruth Hodges for their help in translating into English and correcting the early drafts.

¹ See amongst others the journals *Cuadernos del Cendes*, no. 10 (1989) and *Politeia* (1989) both dedicated entirely to the *Caracazo*. Also M. Kornblith, *Venezuela en los 90* (Caracas, 1999), and Fernando Coronil and Julie Skurski, 'Dismembering and Remembering the Nation: The

as shops rather than aimed at political objectives? Why did it occur under a democratic regime? These questions deserve a reply that may contribute not only to a better understanding of this revolt in particular but also of similar protests in the past or even those occurring in the future.

In this article I describe in detail the events occurring during the *Caracazo* or *Sacudón*, as the episode is known, in order to present the essential facts that will help me address these important questions. I also try to leave the path open for future comparative studies with other outstanding revolts in Latin American such as the 1948 *Bogotazo* or the 1993 *Santiagoñazo*. My account is based upon multiple contemporary press sources as well as statements given by witnesses and the authorities at the time. What emerges is the weakness of a set of institutions that regulated Venezuela's political and social life, a weakness that played an important role in the duration of the revolt and in the violent forms of collective action that prevailed. I shall also compare this episode with the wave of protests that occurred between December 1935 and February 1936 in Venezuela, when Juan Vicente Gómez, the dictator of the country for 27 years, died. In this comparison some differences surface that help to explain why in 1989 political targets were not the central focus of the crowds.

The article is divided into four parts. In the first, I review some conceptual interpretations of revolts of this nature. In the second, I describe in narrative the events of the first day of the *Caracazo*. In the third part, I look at the second and subsequent days of the disturbance in the same manner. In the fourth part, I take stock of the material and human losses. I end with a historical comparison of the *Sacudón* with the protests of 1935–1936 and draw some conclusions.

I. Popular revolts

In its forms of protest and the predominantly violent nature of the collective actions which took place, the popular revolt of 27 February 1989 and subsequent days is reminiscent of popular uprisings in some Latin American cities in the past and also of the notorious food riots experienced by European societies during the centuries of transition to modernity: barricades, burnings, stoning, the occupation of streets and premises, looting with booty sometimes shared out, sometimes not.² According to some relevant specialist literature on urban uprisings, actions of the type carried out during the *Sacudón* were

Semantics of Political Violence in Venezuela,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 33, no. 2 (1991), pp. 288–335 and R. Hillman, *Crisis and Transition in Venezuela* (Boulder, 1994).

² See S. Arram and S. Ortoll, *Riots in the Cities. Popular Politics and the Urban Poor in Latin America, 1765–1910* (Wilmington, DE, 1994); G. Rudé, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England* (London, 1964); E. P. Thompson, *Costumes in Common* (London, 1993).

characteristic of pre-modern European societies, since in modern societies social unrest is normally channelled through organised actors using a repertoire of forms of protest predominantly peaceful or conventional in nature, though occasionally confrontational in special circumstances.³

However, as these forms of protest have emerged unusually powerfully in many of the world's societies in the last two decades, new interpretations are needed to address this issue. Walton and Seddon for example have proposed an analogy between the European transitions to modernity and the present situation of many Third World countries as a way of interpreting this phenomenon. They argue that the latter are going through a societal transition characterised by the passage from paternalist modernisation, which in the case of Latin America was promoted by a pro-development populist state, to liberal modernisation led by international financial agencies through the imposition of policies shaped by neo-liberal doctrine.⁴ The popular sectors of these societies, like the poor in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, are seen as having evolved a 'moral economy' during the modern paternalist phase, that is to say a moral code by which they expect to be tied to the economy, the authorities and the wealthy. In accordance with this code, the poor feel that they have the right to be protected by the authorities from the vicissitudes of the market and to be able to obtain at least the minimum resources necessary for their survival. The similarity between the forms of action of recent protest and the earlier ones, as well as the virulence of each, can be attributed in part to the fact that when the authorities abandoned paternalism in order to apply the doctrine of *laissez faire*, then, as now, they betrayed the moral code that exists between them and the poor.

Several articles written in Venezuela during the 1990s have shown that the *Caracazo* was triggered off by a set of causes, among which the betrayal of the moral economy as outlined by Walton and Seddon played an important role.⁵ But as Walton and Seddon have recognised, each society also protests in its own way according to its history and institutions. That is why, even if similar in some features, popular revolts such as the *Bogotazo* of 1948, the *Santiagoñazo* of 1993 or the numerous violent protests occurring today against neo-liberal policies show, when compared, important differences in actors, motives or forms of collective action.⁶ In this regard it is useful to go back to the idea of

³ Thompson, *Costumes*, 1993; E. J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels, Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movements* (Manchester, 1959).

⁴ J. Walton and D. Seddon, *Free Markets and Food Riots. The Politics of Global Adjustments* (Cambridge, 1994).

⁵ M. Kornblith, *Venezuela en los 90*, and Fernando Coronil and Julie Skurski, 'Dismembering and Remembering the Nation' may serve as examples.

⁶ The *Santiagoñazo* occurred in the major cities of the Santiago del Estero province in Argentina in December 1993. It shared with the *Caracazo* of 1989 the same motives: it was a protest against the effects of economic adjustment. Nevertheless, it was initiated by the

'disruptive action' developed by Piven and Cloward. These authors argue that the use of the power to disrupt everyday life is practically the only power which the poor have at their disposal in order to put pressure on the authorities, and that this 'wells up out of the terrible travails that people experience at times of rupture and stress'.⁷ Although they point out the difficulty of anticipating when such action might arise, they underline the institutional context as crucial for an understanding of where it begins, why some forms of action prevail over others and why protest can be accompanied by varying degrees of violence.⁸ In the Venezuelan case the betrayal of the moral economy took place in a context where institutions of representation and mediation were undergoing a process of decline. Poor performance and unwillingness to reform had been eroding their image and political capacities for a decade. Furthermore, institutions regulating everyday social and political life, which are usually weak in third world countries as Venezuela, were at the time particularly inefficient. As a result, the betrayal of the moral economy sparked protests in the streets led by students and improvised leaders rather than by parties or unions. The collective actions went unchecked for hours, encouraging violence and extending the revolt throughout the country.

In the narrative of the events that follows I take into account the general perspectives of Walton and Seddon as well as the Piven and Cloward thesis, and put great emphasis on reconstructing the unfolding of the revolt. As will be evident from my sources what emerges most clearly is the weakness and clumsiness of the response of many institutions that regulated social and political life in Venezuela. This strengthens the argument of Piven and Cloward on the importance of the institutional context for understanding key aspects of disturbances of these kinds.

II. 27 February 1989

During the weekend of 25 and 26 February 1989 an increase of 100 per cent in the price of petrol came into force throughout the country, as laid down in the programme of macroeconomic adjustments announced on 16 February by the government of President Carlos Andrés Pérez. This in turn led to an increase

public service workers of the province who seized and burned the governor's house, as well as the legislative assembly and justice buildings. See Miguel Lauffer and Claudio Spiguel, 'Las puebladas argentinas después del *Santiagoñazo*' in M. López-Maya (ed.), *Protesta popular, democracia y neoliberalismo* (Caracas, 1999), pp. 15–43. The *Bogotázo*, similar to the *Caracazo* in the looting and destruction of shops, showed, however, a major presence of the political parties in the revolt, which was sparked off by the murder of the Liberal party leader Jorge Eliézar Gaitán. Differences in other recent protests triggered by economic adjustment can be appreciated in Walton and Seddon, *Free Markets and Food Riots*.

⁷ F. F. Piven and R. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements. Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York, 1977), pp. 26–7. ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

in public transport fares. The Ministry of Transport and Communications (MTC) had followed the usual procedures of negotiation to reach an agreement with the National Transport Federation (Fedetransporte) by which public transport fares would rise by 30 per cent, increases were announced in the press. However, the Union of Taxis and Minibuses (Central Única de Autos Libres y por Puestos), which was affiliated to the federation, had expressed its disagreement with the rate of increase authorised by the government, and on 27 February its president dissociated himself from Fedetransporte's announcements and implied that the Union would not exercise its authority to make its members limit increases in fares to the level announced.⁹

According to reports in two of the capital's leading national circulation dailies, *El Nacional* and *El Universal*, early on the morning of 27 February the first protests began at some of the key points of the capital's public transport system. The initial protests started before 6.00 am at the Nuevo Circo de Caracas terminal, the main arrival point for those coming from the suburbs and dormitory towns of La Guaira, Catia La Mar and Guarenas. In all these instances the public transport drivers had attempted to charge fares in excess of the increase agreed with the Ministry. The passengers, especially students, resisted. The capital's press reported that similar protests against the increase in fares led by students and passengers had occurred from early in the morning in the leading cities of Barquisimeto, San Cristóbal, Mérida, Maracay, Barcelona and Puerto La Cruz; likewise in towns on the central seaboard, and in Los Teques, Puerto Ordaz and Maracaibo. In the afternoon newspapers reported the start of disturbances in other important cities such as Valencia, Carora, Acarigua and Ciudad Guayana. By the very nature of the sources which we are using, the most detailed account of how events were triggered off and subsequently unfolded comes from Caracas and the surrounding area. This account will serve to provide an assessment of the revolt at its most extreme.

At 6.00 a.m. on 27 February, then, students from the Instituto Universitario Politécnico Luis Caballero Mejías, well known in the city for their political activism, occupied the Nuevo Circo intercity terminal serving short routes to and from Caracas. The workers and vendors at the terminal immediately expressed their support for the occupation. At first there were heated verbal exchanges between students and drivers, then meetings with the authorities at the terminal, while instructions were awaited from the ministry of transport, instructions which never arrived. As a form of protest the students organised a sit-down on the roadway, forming a human barrier blocking the entry road to the terminal. They held up a newspaper which gave details of the official fares and denounced the flagrant breach of these on the part of the drivers on

⁹ *El Nacional*, 28 Feb. 1989, p. C-2.

the Caracas-Guatire-Guarenas route. The students also carried leaflets giving student fare rates and advice from the Students' Centre on what to do if these fares were not observed. The drivers claimed that they were only following orders from their bosses at the Central Única not to comply with the official 30 per cent increase as published in the press.

It is worth noting that the university student movement in Venezuela as in many Latin American societies has a long and important tradition of political street activism that goes back to the 19th century. Their involvement in the independence struggles, and in many confrontations against caudillos and dictators combined with their education and middle or upper class social status have given them a role in many of the major political moments of Venezuelan history. The most outstanding examples were their efforts in pushing in the name of the popular sectors for democratic modernisation in 1928, 1935–36 and 1958. Soon after the creation of the democratic regime in 1958 high school and university students opposed Betancourt's government, claiming that the parties of Punto Fijo had betrayed the popular sectors. The guerrilla struggles in the 1960s also had important support from the student movement of the time. Since the eighties the collective actions of the student movement had been growing both in number and in their violent nature.¹⁰

According to press sources and interviews, on Monday 27 February, several student protests had been organised in Caracas and its suburban districts, both to resist the official fare increases and to halt the abuses of this increase that the student organisations anticipated the drivers of public transport vehicles would be committing.¹¹ Some days previously, in the Andean university city of Mérida, there had already been violent student protests, following the death of a student during demonstrations organised against the economic adjustment programme.¹² For the students the protests against the fare increases were part of their struggle against price increases in general and constituted manifestations of their strong opposition to the economic adjustment programme of President Pérez, the so-called 'neoliberal package'.

According to the account of a reporter from *El Diario de Caracas* who arrived in the dormitory town of Guarenas at around 7.30 a.m., there were already two

¹⁰ For some insight into the university student movement and its protests in the nineties see R. Hillman, *Crisis and Transition*, pp. 95–114.

¹¹ This is very clear in the oral statements given by student leaders of the time in the forum *A diez años de los sucesos del 27 de febrero de 1989* (my notes), (Caracas 9–10 March 1999). See also K. Stephany, 'El movimiento estudiantil universitario y su lucha por el PLES,' unpubl. paper delivered at the seminar 'Protesta popular en la Venezuela contemporánea,' Cendes-Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1999. This last study is based in part upon interviews with leaders of that time.

¹² K. Stephany, 'Políticas de ajuste y protesta popular en Venezuela: 1989 y 1996,' unpubl. Master thesis, Cendes-Universidad Central de Venezuela, 2001, pp. 156–60.

cars ablaze by then and looting had begun in the Miranda Shopping Centre.¹³ The police did not have the equipment to respond because widespread violent protests are rare in such areas; they had no tear-gas, for example, except for a few pellets which they were using selectively against well-known trouble-makers. According to journalists and cameramen covering the scene, there had been considerable tension in Guarenas since the previous weekend as residents anticipated that the public transport operators would flout the official fare increases. Nevertheless, revealing its incapacity to deal with these matters, the government took no special precautionary measures in advance. Commander Rafael Galué García of the National Guard was only sent to the town only that morning. Partly as a result of the huge traffic jams caused by the disturbance, it was not until mid-morning that he arrived in Guarenas with a contingent of guards, subordinates and officers, and four armoured cars and equipment for controlling public disturbances. What he found was a city already launched upon a violent protest and a mere sixteen policemen who were completely overwhelmed by the situation.¹⁴ All commercial premises and police posts, as well as the transport terminal itself, were destroyed before control could be achieved.

Back in Caracas, when the throng from the Nuevo Circo headed by the students felt that it had sufficient strength of numbers, it moved from Avenida Lecuna to Avenida Bolívar just opposite the Centro Simón Bolívar. Near the bust of Bolívar located there they began to build barricades to block the traffic, while shouting slogans condemning the price increases affecting goods and services. This action enabled them to block off one of the main traffic arteries of the city.¹⁵

Sometime after midday another crowd, again headed by students, and apparently coming from the same protest at the Nuevo Circo Terminal, gathered in front of the Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV). They were exhorting the UCV students to join the protest and already formed a fairly large group.¹⁶ This crowd was protesting not only against the fare increases but also against the economic measures being imposed by the Pérez government. They

¹³ What follows is from Ray Escobar, 'Reporteros de Guerra,' in Ediciones Centauro, *El estallido de febrero: secuencia escrita y gráfica de sucesos que cambiaron la historia de Venezuela* (Caracas, 1989).

¹⁴ Roberto Giusti, 'A merced de los insurrectos [interview with Commander R. García Galué]' in *Cuando la muerte tomó las calles* (Caracas, 1990), pp. 23–5.

¹⁵ See Fabricio Ojeda, 'Saqueos y barricadas,' in *El día que bajaron los cerros* (Caracas, 1989), pp. 25–7.

¹⁶ According to a statement made by Jorge Rodríguez, President of the Medical Students Centre of the Universidad Central de Venezuela that year, the UCV student leaders were taken by surprise by the events, only becoming aware of them towards the end of the morning. (Statement of ex student leader J. Rodríguez at the forum *A diez años de los sucesos del 27 de febrero de 1989*, my notes, Caracas 9–10 March 1999.)

positioned cars across the access road to Plaza Venezuela and Plaza Las Tres Gracias from the Universidad Central de Venezuela, thus blocking the traffic at another of the city's nerve centres. It was not until about 5.00 pm that the Metropolitan police arrived and confronted the students. Once again this delay reveals the inadequacy of the institutional response.

At around 2.00 p.m., the blockade of the Francisco Fajardo highway began.¹⁷ The crowd came from Central Park, from the area around the UCV and from the Charneca district, and at each of the highway intersections began to place branches, empty bottle crates and any other objects which might block the road to cars. Any passing lorry which was thought to be carrying foodstuffs was stopped by the crowd and the driver non-violently detained while the cargo was unloaded and distributed, after which he was requested to park the lorry across the carriageway. The Metropolitan police arrived later but on arrival they said they had orders to take no action.¹⁸ Meanwhile, an overspill of people from the Nuevo Circo protest had now taken over the intersection of Avenida Lecuna with Avenida Las Fuerzas Armadas where, not far from the headquarters of the Federal District fire-brigade, they set fire to a bus and prevented firefighters from approaching to put out the blaze. Another plume of smoke near the Roca Tarpeya area was evidence of a fire on the hill skirting the junction of Avenida Las Fuerzas Armadas with Avenida Nueva Granada.

Led by the students, men and women of all ages, and children, were yelling protests against the economic measures announced by President Pérez. The Metropolitan police arrived firing shots into the air, after which calm was restored, and two police wagons were stationed near Avenida Lecuna. Late in the afternoon, in the Central Park building complex, a female student from UCV died from a shotgun pellet fired at point-blank range at her face by a policeman.¹⁹ Once more, the ability of the institutions to deal with the situation seems to have been inadequate.

By 6.00 p.m. the combination of blockading of the key arteries of the city by the crowds, the student demonstrations, and the start of the looting of commercial premises and food lorries caused by the absence of any institutional presence in the streets and the paralysis of public transport, had produced chaos in the city. Another phenomenon evident from early on was that of the city's motorcycle couriers joining in the popular protests.²⁰ Thousands

¹⁷ This description of the blockade of the Francisco Fajardo highway is that given by *El Nacional*, 28 Feb 1989, p. C-1, except for the information regarding the residents of the Charneca district, which is found in Ojeda, 'Saqueos y barricadas,' pp. 25-7.

¹⁸ Besides *El Nacional*, *ibid.*, the leader of the MAS party, Freddy Muñoz, also asserts that the police had instructions to cordon off the area but not interfere. See 'La muerte de la quietud' in *Cuando la muerte tomó las calles*, pp. 54-9.

¹⁹ Víctor Manuel Reinoso, 'Destino: La Morgue,' in *Cuando la muerte tomó las calles*, p. 74.

²⁰ Ojeda, 'Saqueos y barricadas,' pp. 25-7; Betancourt in *El Nacional* 21 Feb. 1999.

of these dispatch riders work in Caracas, travelling throughout the city daily to maintain communications between employees of the various public services. By 9.00 a.m. they had joined the popular protest and were travelling from one place to the other, ferrying those engaged in blockades, carrying news of demonstrations taking place, giving advance notice of approaching police patrols and providing cover with their motorcycles at corners and streets running across the main avenues. This was an important factor in the spreading of the revolt.

At nightfall thousands of people were forced to find their way home without any public transport, for by that time the Caracas metro had closed down.²¹ As a result, more crowds took to the streets to start their journey home. On the way they became aware of the size of the protest which was unfolding. There were similar descriptions given by the press of events in the outlying towns around Caracas, such as those on the central seaboard, in the valleys of the River Tuy and other areas in Miranda state. Protests in the port of La Guaira, for example, began before dawn when passengers objected to the drivers' attempts to charge fares in excess of those fixed by the ministry. The port was paralysed from that day onwards. For the same reason in Catia La Mar an angry crowd laid huge tyres across Avenida El Ejército and set fire to them thereby cutting off this avenue and the surrounding slum areas, as well as small towns round about. The presence of students is also noted in some reports. In Macuto, for example, a food lorry was attacked by demonstrators while a student delegation was having talks with the president of the management committee of the municipal council and the local prefect. However, the press records no evidence of public response.

The story was repeated in the main cities such as Barquisimeto, the capital of Lara state and one of the most highly populated cities in the country. In this case, it also began with protests by students against the increase in student fares, and was followed by protests from public transport users in general. As no one in authority seemed to appear or take any action, the crowd turned violent, spreading the protest and beginning looting across the city. However, unlike Caracas, at midday the governor called out the National Guard. President Pérez was intending to visit the city in the afternoon to attend a meeting of businessmen, which might explain why the governor acted so quickly to control the situation. As a result Barquisimeto suffered to a lesser degree than other cities. Pérez flew in that evening but apparently remained unaware of what was happening, or at least attached little importance to it.²²

²¹ Ojeda, 'Saques y barricadas'.

²² The president did not mention problems of any sort in Barquisimeto in an interview given shortly afterwards (see Roberto Giusti, 'Fue una explosión social' in *Cuando la muerte tomó las calles*, pp. 37–45). More recently, one of his entourage on that day claimed that Pérez did

As the absence of intervention by those in authority continued, the looting in the capital and other cities intensified at nightfall and continued right through to the following day.²³ That night saw parties held in some of the working class districts of the capital, with whisky, champagne and other gastronomic treats obtained from the looting spree.²⁴ Some accounts describe looting in the Avenida Andrés Bello, notably in the Cooperative Discount Store of the Oficina Central de Personal and its storerooms. This was one of the largest department stores in the city. They also show that the disturbance spread all around the city centre, to the working class districts, middle class neighbourhoods and shopping centres. In the early hours of 28 February the army was ordered on to the streets to gain military control of the city.²⁵

III. From 28 February to 3 March

Following the night of looting, the rebellion spread to a large number of the major cities in the country. In Caracas, the main avenues were taken over by hundreds of demonstrators, smashing shop windows and doors and seizing everything they could lay their hands on.²⁶ Amongst the slogans to be heard or seen scrawled on walls were 'The people are hungry', 'The people are angry' and 'No more deception'. In some cases banners were waved and people were singing the national anthem at the same time as shops were being looted.²⁷ The crowds blocked the traffic by lighting huge bonfires in the middle of the main avenues, thus cutting off all entry routes to the city. As in similar urban uprisings elsewhere, cases were reported of particularly vicious attacks on shops owned by foreigners, in this case Chinese, Lebanese and Portuguese immigrants, on the grounds that they were responsible for the shortages because they had been hoarding supplies.²⁸ There were also reports of armed groups, some actually in police uniforms with their faces masked by handkerchiefs, arriving in lorries to take away the entire stock of shops. What during early Monday had been a protest against high prices and fare increases connected to the students' struggle against the IMF-backed structural

know about the disturbances, but was inclined to see them as something which would blow over (see Betancourt in *El Nacional* 21 Feb. 1999).

²³ Fabricio Ojeda, 'Beirut en Caracas,' in *El día que bajaron los cerros*, pp. 33–5 and Sanín, *Los muertos de la deuda o el final de la Venezuela saudita* (Caracas, 1989).

²⁴ Fabricio Ojeda, 'Paz a punta de cañones,' in *El día que bajaron los cerros*, pp. 43–9.

²⁵ Giusti, 'A merced de los insurrectos,' pp. 23–25.

²⁶ The information which follows comes mainly from the newspaper *El Universal*, 1 March 1989, pp. 4–22, and F. Ojeda, 'Beirut en Caracas,' pp. 33–5. Some details have been added from Coronil and Skurski, 'Dismembering and Remembering the Nation,' pp. 288–335.

²⁷ These details appear in Coronil and Skurski, 'Dismembering and Remembering the Nation,' p. 315. ²⁸ *Ibid.*

adjustment, in the absence of signs of action from government, had become by Tuesday a huge popular revolt with all kinds of groups taking part.

Although some reports reveal that during that day in Caracas the police used more force and the army came out in the streets firing light automatic rifles, others indicate that in some areas the police actually supported some of the actions of the protesters. In Antúmano district, for example, the Metropolitan Police, realising their inability to control the situation, came to an arrangement with the residents, allowing women and children to enter the shops and loot while the men remained behind barricades on the hill (where they lived), waiting for the plunder to arrive.²⁹ Once again these events illustrate the inability of the institutions to cope with the situation.

Similar scenes as those in Caracas and its suburbs now took place in practically all the main and secondary cities of the country. In Barinas, for example, the protest began with the students from the Universidad de Los Llanos setting fire to a bakery, and demonstrations later spread to the working class districts. In Maracaibo, housewives, students, workers and street vendors protested against the high cost of living. In the city centre the mob looted supermarkets and shops and public transport drivers stopped work and later that day, the disturbances spread throughout the city. In Barcelona, capital of Anzoátegui state in the east of the country, the disturbances and looting intensified in the morning but eased off towards the afternoon. However, in Puerto La Cruz, the most important tourist centre in the state, the disturbances and looting persisted throughout the day and the city was taken over by the National Guard. The public transport operators had introduced a 100 per cent fare increase, but after talks throughout the course of the day, the regional authorities persuaded them to accept the official 30 per cent rise. Finally, in Porlamar in the state of Nueva Esparta, petrol station operators threatened to leave the island without fuel if the prices and profit margins allowed by the new decrees were not reviewed, while students at the Universidad de Oriente in Nueva Esparta protested at the fare increases, closing the road between the cities of Porlamar and La Asunción to traffic by blocking it with burning tyres.

The data reveal certain important aspects in the development of the popular revolt. First, that it was triggered by the student protests against the increase of transport fares during the first morning in several places throughout the country. Second, although the students were protesting against these increases that day, their actions were part of a general strategy of struggle against the economic adjustment plan. Student protests had already taken place in Caracas and Mérida on previous days. Third, people waiting for transport to take them to work joined in the protests early that morning, driven first by the fare increases, but more especially by drivers raising prices the official rate rise.

²⁹ F. Ojeda, 'Beirut en Caracas,' pp. 33–5; R. Giusti, 'La muerte de la quietud,' pp. 36–8.

Fourth, on the morning of 27 February no public authorities appeared, either to confront the emerging protest, or to stop the overcharging by drivers. Fifth, by Tuesday most of the urban areas of the country were affected.

The government addressed the population for the first time through the Minister of the Interior shortly after midday on 28 February, appealing for calm and declaring, though obviously too late, that violence would not be tolerated.³⁰ However, this appeal had little effect, especially as the minister himself became ill before he could finish, so that his speech had to be halted the first time and delivered again two hours later. The only explanation given was that he had suffered a fall in his blood pressure. This unconvincing explanation merely served to increase the sense of political uncertainty. Later, shortly before 6.00 p.m., the country's television and radio stations transmitted a simultaneous networked broadcast in which President Pérez, accompanied by his cabinet, declared the suspension of a raft of constitutional guarantees and the imposition of martial law from 6.00 p.m. to 6.00 a.m. for the following days.

With the imposition of the curfew the revolt began to die down, aided by a brutal wave of repression which was unleashed on the population, and especially on the inhabitants of the working class districts of Caracas. This repression, already evident in certain areas of the city during the day, intensified during the night and in the following days. In a desperate and clumsy attempt to control the situation, the various police forces and the army vented their anger on the working class districts, on both residents and passers-by alike. On 1 March, on the so-called Mesuca Steps in Petare, a slum area, the army fired on the crowd, killing more than twenty people.³¹

During the morning of 1 March, the looting and shooting continued in several parts of Caracas, but by now it was being carried out by criminal gangs, often armed, rather than by large mobs.³² For instance, it was reported that in the 23 de Enero, an area in the west of the city largely comprising working class districts, the situation was very dangerous, with the army confronting snipers positioned on the flat rooftops of some of the working-class blocks of flats.³³ The soldiers, most of them inexperienced youths aged around eighteen, fired at the buildings with their light automatic rifles, damaging flats and killing unarmed civilians in their homes.³⁴

³⁰ Sanín, *Los muertos de la deuda*, pp. 27–9.

³¹ Statement of father Matías Camuñas at the forum 'A diez años de los sucesos' (my notes), (Caracas 9–10 March 1999).

³² Nieves in *El Universal*, 2 Feb. 1989, pp. 4–14 and statement of journalist Kiko, at the forum 'A diez años de los sucesos'.

³³ Álvarez in *El Nacional* 2 Feb. 1989, p. D-último.

³⁴ Elizabeth Araujo, 'Un río de balas cruzó Petare,' in *Cuando la muerte tomó las calles*, pp. 81–3.

While the protest continued in the capital, the curfew and militarisation brought about a restoration of calm in the cities of the interior. On the first day there were still focal points of unrest in Maracay and Maracaibo, but Guarenas, Mérida, Acarigua, Puerto Ordaz, Carora and Barquisimeto were reported calm, though with all commercial activities, schools and transport at a standstill and armoured cars travelling along the main thoroughfares in the midst of all the rubble.

The nights of 1 and 2 March were terrifying for the working class districts of Caracas. Stories tell of police raids on homes and shoot-outs in some districts, buildings set on fire and corpses lying in the streets at the end of the curfew.³⁵ This repressive overreaction, with substantial human rights violations, was in fact part of the same institutional weakness. The lack of action at the beginning of the protest had led to the brutal repression of the days following, revealing the incompetence of the public institutions in general.

Signs of a return to normality started to appear gradually on 3 March and more steadily the next day: hawkers returning to the street, staff coming out to clean up, traders returning to sort out their businesses. Meanwhile, the cemeteries were crowded with people seeking to bury their dead.³⁶ The press continued to publish reports of snipers and the response by soldiers and police in the poorer western districts of the city, but there was no longer any looting. By 3 March, the country's main and secondary cities were reporting a return to normality and a cautious resumption of urban activities. In some cities such as Maracaibo and San Felipe, the curfew was reduced or removed that same night.

IV. Taking stock of the losses

At the end of that week and throughout the following days, attempts were made to calculate the numbers of the dead and wounded and the cost of the damage done. However, to this day the figures remain incomplete and unreliable. Shortly after the *Sacudón*, the minister of defence officially reported the number of deaths as 277.³⁷ However, more recent studies have come up with higher figures. An examination of the lists at the mortuary of Bello Monte in Caracas, where by law all those who had died in the streets and hospitals of the capital during those days had to be taken, produced a total of 310 deaths.³⁸

³⁵ For a dramatic account of events during those days, see R. Giusti, 'Fue una explosión social' and 'A lo mejor se dispara,' in *Cuando la muerte tomó las calles*, pp. 58–60 and 75–7; Régulo Párraga, 'Noche de terror,' F. Ojeda, 'Pánico bajo techo' and E. Araujo, 'Ronda en la noche,' in *El día que bajaron los cerros*, pp. 61–2, 69–71 and 72–4.

³⁶ F. Ojeda, 'Entre lluvia y basura,' in *El día que bajaron los cerros*, pp. 81–4.

³⁷ R. Giusti, 'A lo mejor se dispara,' p. 36.

³⁸ Roberto Briceño León, 'Contabilidad de la muerte,' in *Cuando la muerte tomó las calles*, p. 103.

A later analysis using the same lists calculated the deaths as having numbering 322.³⁹ These figures do not include deaths which occurred in the interior of the country, or the corpses which never reached the mortuary.

In 1992 a list of 396 dead was drawn up by two human rights organisations, the Network of Support for Justice and Peace, and the Committee of Families of the Victims of February–March 1989 (COFAVIC) which had been formed as a result of the atrocities committed by the security forces during the troubles. The list was based on information supplied by the families of those who had died or disappeared during those days and this figure is the one I consider to be closest to the actual death toll.⁴⁰

Elsewhere the forensic director of the mortuary of Bello Monte reported that the first two corpses arrived there at 10.00 pm on 27 February, which is fairly late when one considers that the revolt began before 6.00 am. Staff at various welfare centres maintain that very few dead bodies were brought in that day, the majority of admissions being wounded victims of accidents which had occurred during looting. On the other hand, a member of Pérez's cabinet at the time recently stated publicly that on the morning of the 28th they were informed of a total of 63 fatalities, which, if it were true, would represent 15.9 per cent of the number of deaths according to the definitive figures supplied by COFAVIC.⁴¹ These indications, together with the conclusions reached by Briceño-León's study of the personal details of the victims carried out from an examination of the mortuary lists, as well as the tables which the Peace Studies Centre produced with the causes of death and the anatomical location of the firearm wounds, also based on the same lists, reveal that the deaths took place mostly from the 28th February onwards and that it was the security forces who were mainly responsible for them. So here again, institutional procedures, the curfew and suspension of guarantees, were used with no control whatever. In fact, according to the Peace Studies Centre of the Central University of Venezuela 85.8 per cent of the deaths were caused by firearms and 11.9 per cent from causes which were not recorded. Of 266 corpses showing firearm wounds, more than 60 per cent died from shots either to the thorax (35.71 per cent) or the head (29.32 per cent). Of these corpses, 211 bore only one gunshot wound (79.2 per cent), while 39 had two (14.66 per cent).⁴²

As for the number of wounded, the information available only permits a rough approximation. On 4 March 1989 the government reported 1,009 wounded by firearms, 218 by knives and other sharp instruments, and 604 cut by glass. However, the casualty hospital in the east of Caracas, the

³⁹ Centro de Estudios para la Paz de la Universidad Central de Venezuela, 'Caracterización de las muertes violentas en Caracas, 1986–1988,' (database) (Caracas, 1999).

⁴⁰ See E. Ochoa Antich, *Los golpes de febrero* (Caracas, 1992).

⁴¹ Statement of Carlos Blanco ex-minister of planning at the forum *A diez años de los sucesos*.

⁴² Centro de Estudios para la Paz, 'Caracterización de las muertes violentas'.

Pérez de León, reported that it alone had treated 575 wounded, which makes the official figure implausible.⁴³

As far as material damage was concerned, the official inventory for the critical areas of Caracas, Petare and the Central Seaboard recorded the destruction of 900 general stores, 131 grocery shops, 60 supermarkets, 95 hardware shops, 72 stationers, and 850 other assorted stores. In the state of Miranda (excluding the area which overlaps with the metropolitan area of Caracas), Aragua and Carabobo, 784 shops were destroyed.⁴⁴ The chamber of insurers calculated losses to be in excess of 3,073 million bolívares, calculated from those businesses covered by insurance policies. A similar amount could be assumed for those which were uninsured. 75 per cent of the businesses affected were general stores and other small shops serving the hill districts and the poor outlying areas. It was reported also that 35 per cent of supermarkets belonging to chains in the metropolitan area were affected. These figures can only be regarded as broad approximations.

The number of arrests during the *Caracazo* ran into the thousands and lengthy research would be needed to obtain reliable figures. By March the press reported that in Puerto Ordaz there were around a hundred people detained, in Barquisimeto over 500, in Carora 20, in San Cristóbal 300, in the main and secondary cities of the state of Aragua 2000, in Cumaná 200, and in Valencia over 1800. According to a list drawn up by the Federation of University Unions, more than 100 students were arrested in different operations. Some of those detained in the Dirección de Seguridad e Inteligencia Policial (Disip) had been beaten with baseball bats and pieces of metal piping during the interrogations.⁴⁵

V. Comparison with the protests of 1935–1936

The disruptive action of the *Caracazo* was much more extensive and more violent than any previous protest in contemporary Venezuela. However, it does bear resemblances to the wave of protests which took place throughout the country between 18 December 1935 and 14 February 1936, a time when the death of the dictator Gómez led to a period of weakness in the public institutions leading to an exceptional sequence of political events.

In December 1935, after 27 years of authoritarian and personalistic rule, Juan Vicente Gómez died at his home in Maracay. Due to the overwhelming power he had concentrated, his death unleashed inevitable institutional

⁴³ *El Nacional*, 5 March 1989, p. A-1 and 16 March 1989, p. C-6.

⁴⁴ *El Nacional*, 5 March 1989, p. A-1.

⁴⁵ *El Nacional*, 7 March 1989, p. D-17; Liliane Blaser, video *Los sucesos del 28 de febrero* (Caracas, 1990).

weakness. The dictator had foreseen this possibility and the 1931 Constitution had included an institutional procedure for the appointment of the successor to the president in the case of his inability to govern. Article 97 established that in such a case a member of the cabinet would be appointed by a majority of its members.⁴⁶ A day before the dictator's death, the Minister of War, General Eleazar López Contreras, was appointed following this procedure.⁴⁷ However, the lack of legitimacy of the political institutions and the traditional use of force and personalistic procedures then common in such situations immediately led to a struggle between the different power factions. While some of the members of the Gómez family and the strong men of his regime gathered around General Eustoquio Gómez, others favoured the succession of López Contreras. As both factions moved to gain a hold on power, the crowds suddenly and unexpectedly took to the streets.

From 18 of December 1935 to the events of 14 February 1936, the crowds established a strong relationship with the emerging authority. In a context characterised by the non-existence of mediation and representative institutions, but where important society transformations had taken place, this was the manner in which political activity reappeared. Since the late 1910s the dynamic of the incipient oil economy combined with the long period of political peace had been transforming rural Venezuela. A more complex and modern society was in the making which until then had had no institutional forms of political expression. Yet interaction between the authorities and crowds as a kind of 'street politics' had a long tradition both in Spain and in her colonies, appearing also in some Latin American cities in the 19th century.⁴⁸ In 1935–1936 Venezuela, this tradition resurfaced. On 18 December, the crowds, under the leadership of the student movement, began to gather in the main squares of the capital and other major cities, firstly to comment on the current events. In the Plaza Bolívar of Caracas they stood in front of the federal district governor's building demanding that López Contreras, who had been sworn in as acting president and who was in the city of Maracay attending Gómez's funeral, should remove the governor, Rafael María Velasco, who was one of the most hated men of the previous regime. López Contreras, in a clever move to win popular support for his political position vis-à-vis his rivals, accepted the demand of the *caraqueños* and removed Velasco, appointing General Felix Galavís as the new governor. When he entered the city, on 20 December, the

⁴⁶ *Constitución de los Estados Unidos de Venezuela de 1931*, <http://home.swbell.net/fakemink/1931.htm#T6S2>.

⁴⁷ For details of the succession of Gómez see R. Moleiro, *De la dictadura a la democracia. Eleazar López Contreras lindero y puente entre dos épocas* (Caracas, 1993), p. 182.

⁴⁸ S. Arrom and S. Ortoll, *Riots in the Cities*.

crowds were waiting for him. That evening in front of the presidential palace he was acclaimed by the people.⁴⁹

As soon as news of the death of Gómez spread throughout the country, disturbances also broke out in other cities. As in the nineteenth century the disappearance of the main caudillo produced a political vacuum to which the crowds on the streets responded in various ways, one of which was looting. But although shops were a target for the crowds as they had always been in the past – and indeed throughout this period many stores were sacked in Caracas, Maracaibo and other cities – most looting occurred at the properties of politicians who had fallen from favour.⁵⁰ Homes and properties of the Gómez family or of *gomecistas* were the main target. These actions were tolerated, and even to a certain extent approved by General López Contreras, who gave instructions to the Armed Forces to make themselves visible but not to attack or harm the people. As López Contreras strengthened his grip on power, his government became less tolerant of this kind of action and repression was enforced. The masses responded by becoming better organised under the leadership of the students and the emerging social and political movements. They began to focus their demands on political modernisation and seem to have responded with violence only when they were violently repressed, as was the case on 14 February.⁵¹

When we compare the events of 1935–36 with those of 1989, we see that although they began in clearly different situations, in their development they shared common features. The institutions of the Gómez regime were strongly dependent on the dictator himself. His death left a political vacuum leading to a weakness in the public institutions. In February 1989 there was no uncertainty about who held power. Pérez had been elected in December with a relatively strong mandate from the people. Nevertheless during the first 32 hours of the revolt there was an absence of authority similar to the political vacuum that followed the demise of Gómez. The civil servants responsible for enforcing the agreements reached with Fedetransporte were not in evidence; the various police forces either did not intervene during the early protests or maintained that they had received orders to stay on the sidelines. The most surprising absence and the most significant in determining the form and scale

⁴⁹ Luis Salamanca, 'Rómulo Betancourt y la protesta de 1936,' paper delivered at the XXI LASA International Congress (Miami, 2000), pp. 4–8. See also R. J. Velásquez, 'Aspectos de la evolución política de Venezuela en el último medio siglo,' in R. J. Velásquez et al., *Venezuela Moderna* (Caracas, 1979), p. 38.

⁵⁰ 'Nicholson to Secretary of State,' 21 Dec. 1935, Strictly Confidential Report no. 113, RG 59 1930–39, no. 831.00/1547, Department of State, National Archives of the United States, Washington.

⁵¹ Salamanca, 'Rómulo Betancourt,' pp. 4–8.

of the revolt was that of the national government itself. It did not make a public appearance until after midday on 28 of February.

Many testimonies, both made at the time and subsequently, reveal little knowledge on the part of the national government of the events which were unfolding in Caracas and a significant number of the country's cities throughout the 27th of February. Statements made in various interviews both by ex-President Pérez, and by senior members of his government, such as the Minister of Defence, suggest that leading government ministers, although not completely ignorant of the situation, did not realise or calculate its gravity.⁵² Both President Pérez and the Defence Minister, Del Valle Alliegro, were absent from the capital that day on routine duties. Pérez insisted in an interview given ten years later that the most trusted members of his entourage, including the Ministers of Defence and the Interior, repeatedly informed him that day that nothing out of the ordinary was happening. Consequently, he asserted, he only became aware of the situation towards late evening upon his return to Caracas from Barquisimeto.⁵³

From the statements of ex-President Pérez it also seems clear that the regular intelligence channels of government were not working adequately at the time. However they also reveal that the central government was not expecting any unusual unrest in spite of the harshness of the economic measures it had begun to apply. This suggests a serious political miscalculation, which is further supported by the fact that to this day Pérez denies that the revolt had anything to do with the adjustment programme announced ten days before or even with the application of its first concrete measure, an increase in public transport fares.⁵⁴ He maintains that what happened was basically the result of a problem of insubordination within the Metropolitan Police which had been developing since before he came into office and was due to a number of grievances held by officers against their superiors who belonged to the Guardia Nacional and not to the Metropolitan Police. That was why they did not control the protests and perhaps even encouraged them. This argument may clarify one of the institutional difficulties confronted by Pérez and his cabinet at that time, but as we have seen in the development of the revolt, it is only one of the many institutional weaknesses that converged during those days to produce such an outcome. In sharp contrast, López Contreras in the 1930s had an acute sense of the difficulties he was confronting and manoeuvred with great ability to overcome them. He understood the situation and rapidly paid attention to the crowds, himself getting involved in street politics.

⁵² See R. Giusti, 'Fue una explosión social,' Universidad Central de Venezuela, video *Prohibido Olvidar* (Caracas, 1999). C. Blanco, statement at forum 'A diez años de los sucesos'.

⁵³ See video *Prohibido Olvidar*. ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

After the *Caracazo* the senior leaders of the political parties, Acción Democrática and COPEI, also claimed not to have received any information through their formal or informal channels or from government on 27 February, their first contacts with the Pérez administration only taking place on that night and the following morning.⁵⁵ The government delayed announcing its curfew and suspension of constitutional guarantees until the afternoon of 28 February, alleging it had first to talk with and receive the support of all political forces. This was a political strategy far removed from the one taken some days before when Pérez announced the application of a structural adjustment programme agreed with the IMF without waiting to obtain the political support of other political actors. Pérez did not even have the full support of his own party, because it was internally divided. The trade union leaders, like their fellow members of the dominant parties, were also notable by their absence from the streets and even appeared bewildered by what was happening.⁵⁶ In addition, once they learned of the situation they seemed incapable of leading any action that would help to bring it under control. While during the events of 1935–36 there were no existing democratic channels of mediation, in the democratic regime of 1989 the legitimate channels of mediation and mobilisation were not working. However no one was aware of this problem until the *Caracazo* took place.

The extreme weakness shown by all the institutions in 1989 left the way open for popular revolt to develop unchecked. The government's absence and confusion were subsequently aggravated by the brutality of the repression carried out by the police and military forces, particularly in the capital, though in some regions the state and local authorities acted more judiciously. The extra-institutional procedures used to bring the situation under control and force the masses off the streets merely aggravated the situation: the number of deaths and the nature of the wounds found on the corpses, which we described above, speak for themselves. In this respect too, the *Sacudón* exposed the depth of institutional decline and indeed exacerbated it even further. Here again the contrast is remarkable. Pérez's democratic government resorted almost exclusively to repression while the emerging authoritarian government of López Contreras used mainly political resources to contain the revolt.

Conclusions

The popular revolt of 27 February 1989 was a massive and violent protest carried out by a society, which did not have at its disposal adequate channels

⁵⁵ Statement of ex president of Acción Democrática Humberto Celli at the forum *A diez años de los sucesos*; R. Giusti, 'Lenin en Miraflores,' in *Cuando la muerte tomó las calles*, pp. 50–3.

⁵⁶ Gastón Carvallo and Margarita López Maya, 'Crisis del sistema político venezolano,' *Cuadernos del CENDES*, no. 10 (1989), pp. 47–54.

for making itself heard or heeded by those in the corridors of power. Encouraged by the student protests that took place early that morning, the crowd sought to give expression to its sense of unease at the first concrete expression of the macroeconomic package, namely the increase in public transport fares. For hours they found themselves in a public space where there was no restraint or control by the authorities. As a result the masses turned on the shops, as they had always done in the past when there was a vacuum of authority or an institutional weakness. They could not head for the homes of overthrown politicians, because no politician had been overthrown. But if a coup d'état had taken place during this time of uncertainty, they would surely have taken that route. Tradition was clear in this regard and might only have been stopped by ignorance of the locations in the much bigger and more anonymous city that Caracas had become by the end of the 1980s. However, the Armed Forces, as represented by the Minister of Defence and the High Command, remained loyal to the Pérez regime, thus enabling him and the political elite to survive. On 28 February this was clear in the public address given by Minister Del Valle Alliegro.

The huge disruption to everyday life in Venezuela, which occurred during the *Caracazo* or *Sacudón*, may have been triggered by a set of complex factors among which the betrayal of the moral economy could have played an important role. The protests of student organizations on the morning on 27 February, as well as during the previous days, and some of the slogans written or shouted then tend to confirm the thesis of Walton and Seddon. In this regard, the *Caracazo* was not such a spontaneous outburst as is commonly believed. We have found that anti-neoliberal student protest had been building in the previous days in Mérida as well as other cities. Nevertheless, it was the weakness of the institutions designed in the past to contain and regulate political order and everyday life that explains the extension and violence of the protest. If the political actors and unions had been in tune with their constituencies they could have foreseen the trouble arising from the presidential announcement of the macroeconomic adjustment. Even if it seems unlikely that anyone could have predicted the scale of the discontent that was building up at the time, healthy parties and unions could have planned strategies to oppose or negotiate with the government on these measures. This in turn could have made possible some containment of the discontent and given some hope to the people which might have lessened their anger. However, as we have seen, political representation and mediating institutions had already been seriously eroded.

In the same way, government institutions also revealed many weaknesses. If, when the protest began, public servants had exercised their authority in good time to make public transport drivers comply with the agreements they had signed, or if the police had been prepared to control the first violent

protest actions, the intensity of the protest could have been reduced. Besides, the national government made little effort to build some minimum consensus before making the announcements, failing to use the normal formal or informal channels to the different organised interests affected by the measures. Additionally, it did not seem to have studied the implications that such measures could have for a society living in economic recession and socio-political frustration. Venezuela's democracy revealed itself during those days to be so lacking in democratic traits, and its institutions that regulated everyday life so lacking in consistency, that only a fast, firm and deep political and institutional change could have prevented the delegitimisation of the political process that was unleashed then and which brought society some years later to a political crisis.

This detailed account of the development of the popular Venezuelan revolt of 1989 has revealed the role played by the weakness of the political and everyday regulatory institutions. The comparative perspective with the disturbances of 1935–36 also reveals the relevance of this factor to an understanding of those disturbances. Furthermore, the institutional failures and shortcomings analysed above suggest that third world countries as Venezuela are frequently ill prepared to apply adjustment policies. The abrupt break with the moral economy as effected by president Carlos Andrés Pérez with the announcement of the neoliberal package in 1989, precisely because of the weakness of the Venezuelan institutions, left the population angry and without defence against abuses. This led to popular unrest and resistance that combined with further institutional weaknesses ended up in severe violence. The analysis provided here for the Venezuelan case, if used for comparative studies might also enrich our insight into other popular revolts of twentieth century Latin America, a most important topic today, when popular uprisings have been on the increase not only in the region but also worldwide.