

The Children of 1989: Resurrecting the Venezuelan Dead

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The present as we receive it comes inevitably laden with residues of the past, sedimentations of the dialectical interplay between action and meaning, and contemporary Venezuela is no exception. I speak to you today at the intersection of two anniversaries. Twenty-five years ago marked what could be considered the violent birth of the Bolivarian revolutionary process in Venezuela, and looming just ahead is the first anniversary of the death of the single individual who has meant the most to that process, Hugo Chávez Frías.

Simply observing the past in the present, however, gives us little guidance about *what to do* with that past. Here, the Marx of the *Eighteenth Brumaire* seems clear enough in his insistence that “the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living,” and in his concomitant imperative for contemporary revolutionaries to, as he puts it, “let the dead bury the dead.” But the question for today is whether this is the case in Venezuela, whether the dead past weighs heavily upon the living present, or if this history is something lighter altogether that can provide the basis for future revolutionary unfoldings.

What’s more: as I speak to you, Venezuela is witnessing a period of unrest, with protests in the streets and sharp debates over the meaning of the moment. Proponents of the protests, however, the enemies of the Bolivarian process, insist in not-so-subtle terms that we in fact let the dead bury the dead, urging us to forget the past so that they can seize the present. But to do so would be impossible. The history of Venezuela’s present, I argue, liberates at least as much as it constrains, and as a result, our task is not so much to “let the dead bury the dead” as it is to reanimate those corpses, to endow them with voice and allow them to speak directly to new possible futures.

This task of the radical resurrection of history defies many traditional

methods. Properly understood, the Venezuelan present is not the product of a slow and linear progression whose truth can be gleaned from demographic data or social indicators. Nor is it the heroic creation of great leaders past, to be compiled in what Foucault called “traditional history.” Instead, the Bolivarian process often emerged *despite* and even *against* such leaders. In fact, such triumphal histories played an immense role in the consolidation from the 1960s onward of a buffered, two-party political system—known as *puntofijismo*—that was impermeable to mass dissatisfaction and that, unable to bend, could only break.

And break it did, in spectacular fashion, 25 years ago this week, on February 27th of 1989, when the political forces and popular demands that had been developing slowly, invisibly, subterraneously, exploded into a rebellion known as the Caracazo or Sacudón. After an electoral campaign critical of international lenders like the IMF and the emerging Washington Consensus, Venezuelan president Carlos Andrés Pérez had imposed his notoriously neoliberal structural adjustment program known as the *paquetazo*.

Enraged by the immediate impact of the reforms—and especially the overnight doubling of transport costs due to the liberalization of domestic gas prices—as well as the “bait-and-switch” method in which this was imposed by Pérez, poor *caraqueños* and later those across Venezuela took to the streets rioting and looting for nearly a week straight. The desperately poor “swarm[ed] into the forbidden cities,” as Frantz Fanon once put it, reuniting a segregated landscape if only momentarily, and in their looting of both necessities and luxuries, revealed the two-sided nature that Marx associated with the commodity, as well as their own intransigent demand that the last would soon be first. The Caracazo was a political event of the first order, blasting a hole in what Walter Benjamin called the continuum of history, and it was into this gaping wound in history that Chávez stepped with a failed coup in February 1992.

Instead of one Venezuela, there were suddenly two, and the previously

frozen dialectic of history was forced into motion in an instant, unleashing everything that has come since. There had been decades of antecedent struggles, but in 1989 the die was cast, the harmonious image of Venezuelan society irreparably smashed, and the unsustainability of both *puntofijismo* and the neoliberal reform package revealed for all to see. The Caracazo simultaneously shook common understandings of who would be the historic subject of any Venezuelan revolution, as it was not the formal working class or the peasantry, but largely those informal and excluded semi-peripheral urban poor so often denigrated as “lumpen” who hurled themselves decisively into the streets, again in Fanon’s words, “redeem[ing] themselves in their own eyes and before history.”

The dead of 1989 are not mere metaphor: concretely speaking, these corpses were between 300 and 3,000, most executed at close range in their homes as the Venezuelan armed forces fired an estimated four million bullets in an attempt to do the impossible, to put the genie back in the bottle, Pandora back into her box. The dead did not, of course, bury the dead, but were instead themselves buried by the servants of a dying political order. Many, like those later exhumed from a zone known as *La Nueva Peste*, The New Plague, had been thrown into plastic bags and tossed into unmarked mass graves.

Much against the wishes of Venezuela’s *ancien régime*, however, these dead would not lay quietly, would not stay silent, and nor should we wish that they inter one another in obscurity. Rather, the process of unburying those corpses, both real and metaphorical, has been a powerful catalyst for what has come since. Annual commemorations of the Caracazo provided the basis for a ritual repetition in which demonstrations yielded police repression, sparking increasingly militant demonstrations as well as the multiplication of popular assemblies across Venezuela’s poorest *barrios*.

If there was such a thing as a founding moment for what has been called the Bolivarian Revolution, this was it. 1989 provided a powerful

