Space, Revolution and Resistance: Ordinary Places and Extraordinary Events in Caracas

Clara Irazabal, Columbia University

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Chapter 7

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Clara Irazábal and John Foley

Introduction

As discussed in the introduction, many scholars have argued that public space is a prerequisite for the expression, representation, preservation and enhancement of democracy (Boudreau, 2000; Caldeira, 2000; Holston and Appadurai, 1999; Low, 2000; Sassen, 1996; Low and Smith, 2006). This has not been more true than in the capital cities of Latin America in recent decades, where political demonstrations have played a critical role in the demise of totalitarian regimes and the re- establishment of democracy. Caracas, capital city of Venezuela, is a prime example in that key urban spaces have been sites for popular demonstrations since Hugo Chávez became President in 1998. Public buildings such as the seats of political and military power, and private ones such as headquarters of media corporations functioned as architectural icons and background to these events.

While much attention has been paid to the role of social, political, and economic factors in the development of these events (Ellner and Hellinger, 2004; Márquez and Piñango, 2003; Méndez, 2004; McCaughan, 2004; Santamaría, 2004), we know less about the influence of the physical and symbolic dimensions of public space. We argue that the urban location and context of particular buildings and spaces, their accessibility to different groups from various areas of the city, and their relative symbolic value have been critical in the unfolding of political events, especially during the coup d'état and Chávez's subsequent reinstatement.
Caracas Scapes: Geographical and Socio-Political Fissures

Covering 912,050 square kilometres (slightly more than twice the size of California), Venezuela has a relatively small population of 25,375,281 people (July 2005 estimates). With the world’s sixth largest oil reserves, the national economy is heavily dependent on petrochemicals. However the proceeds from these resources have not trickled down, leaving 49.4 per cent of the population poor, 21.7 per cent indigent, and 71.1 per cent living below the poverty line (UN/CEPAL, 2001, p. 57), with all estimates showing a dramatic increase in poverty between 1975 and 1995. According to an income-based poverty measure (Riutort, 1999), 33 per cent lived in poverty in 1975 and 70 per cent in 1995. If poverty more than doubled in that period, the number of households in extreme poverty increased three-fold, from about 15 to 45 per cent. Though other non-income-based measures show slightly lower figures, Venezuela registered the largest increase in poverty and has the largest proportion of the population living in poverty in Latin America (Wilpert, 2003b).

It is no surprise that this notable inequality animates contemporary political struggle. In the country’s main cities, such as Caracas, poverty is reflected in squatter settlements (popularly called barrios), accommodating over 40 per cent of the population. Approximately 1,000 metres above sea level, Caracas’s 5.1 million people (2004) inhabit a dense narrow valley bordered by mountains at a density of 1,011.59 people per km$^2$ in a metropolitan area of 2,050 km$^2$. Many of the poor barrios are on steep hills, particularly in Petare in the east (also home to the middle and upper class) and Catia and La Vega in the west (mainly working- and lower-middle class area). Barrios are sprung along river courses, out of sight until the occasional floods wreak havoc.

Right in the middle of the city are the curvaceous ‘garden-suburbs’ of the Caracas Country Club. In the east, high-density blocks of upper-middle-class apartments are spaced on regular streets or climb precariously up the hillsides. To the west, large public housing projects stand out, including the massive Le Corbusier-inspired ‘23rd of January’ estate. In various parts of the city, lower-middle-class apartment buildings crowd the narrow streets of the traditional settlements. On the hills, or snuggled next to exclusive villas of the wealthy in the east, are the intricate, maze-like streets, paths, and stairways of the barrios. The main bustling commercial and industrial core linearly traces the spine of the valley. The hodgepodge of uses and styles of architecture is visually united by the Avinga rising another 1,000 metres to the north, as well as by the tropical vegetation sprouting out of any spare space.

Administratively and politically, Caracas is a fragmented city. The capital strides two large, politically independent entities, Miranda State and Capital District.
The Capital District, seat of national government, has only one municipality — Libertador, whereas four municipalities — Chacao, Sucre, Baruta, and El Hatillo are in Miranda state. Additionally, a metropolitan level of government was created in 2000 to coordinate the activities of the five municipalities. Approximately 65 per cent of the city’s population is in Libertador and 23 per cent in Sucre, leaving only 12 per cent in other three. Most barrios are located in Libertador (65 of the barrio population) and Sucre, the two largest municipalities. Until 2004, these two municipalities had mayors loyal to the national government, whereas Baruta, Chacao and El Hatillo had mayors opposing it. Similarly, the Metropolitan Mayor until 2004, Alfredo Peña, was an active opponent of the national government, although he was elected with its support. In the 2004 elections, however, support for Chávez’s administration increased with the election of Juan Barreto as Metropolitan Mayor.

These rifts were exacerbated by the neo-liberal economic policies implemented by Venezuela’s government throughout the 1980s. Together with political corruption and mismanagement, they greatly reduced the standard of living. The marked reduction in government spending was especially detrimental to the poor, as per capita spending was reduced by 40 per cent between 1980 and 1993. Education spending was slashed by more than 40 per cent, housing and urban development projects by 70 per cent, and health services by 37 per cent. As a result, between 1984 and 1995, the poor doubled to 66 per cent of the total population with those in extreme poverty rising from 11 per cent to 36 per cent (Roberts, 2004). In 1982, 60 per cent of the population could count themselves as part of Venezuela’s privileged middle-class, but by 1990, only 34 per cent could (Márquez and Piñango, 2003). The economy continued to deteriorate throughout the 1993–2003 period (Garcia-Guadilla et al., 2004, p. 10). The following sequences of maps present a socio-economic and socio-spatial analysis of the metropolitan area with data from 1998. Predictably, these factors are fairly correlated with the population’s political preferences (shown in figure 7.5). This mapping helps us understand the uses and meanings of public spaces in the dynamic reformulations of democracy and citizenship in the city.

Figure 7.1 shows the five municipalities that compose the metropolis. Representing population, the map shows that in effect, the two most populous municipalities are Libertador and Sucre, governed by mayors who support Chávez. Complementary, figure 7.2 shows the density in Caracas. Again, the densest areas are in the east and west of the metropolis, coinciding with the greatest concentrations of popular, mostly self-built barrios and low to middle-low income areas. It is important to notice that Miraflores, the Presidential Palace where Chávez resides, is located in the dense district of Libertador. Figure 7.3 clearly shows that there is no direct correlation between land values and accessibility to
Figure 7.1. Municipalities and population in Caracas. The two most populous municipalities are Libertador and Sucre. Drawn by Josefina Florez and Nelliana Viloria in 2000 with data from 1998.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zone Number</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baruta</td>
<td>1,001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chacao</td>
<td>2,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Hatillo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libertador</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sucre</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 7.2. Density in Caracas. The densest areas are in the east and west of the metropolis, where squatter settlements and low to middle-low income housing areas are. The Presidential Palace where Chávez resides is located in the dense area of Libertador. Drawn by Josefina Florez and Nelliana Viloria in 2000 with 1998 data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zone Numbers</th>
<th>Density (Persons/Acre)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>58-75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75-104</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>104-135</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>135-173</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>173-240</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 7.3. Relation between land values and accessibility to the centre of Caracas. Accessibility to the centre where the government institutions are located is measured in minutes of travel time. Elaborated by Josefina Florez and Nelliana Viloria in 2000 with 1998 data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zone Number</th>
<th>Land Values ($/sq feet)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-35</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48-89</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90-126</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

the centre of the city, where Miraflores and many of the government institutions are located. The areas with highest land values are those with the lowest density and largest income, and correspond to formal urbanization. Alternatively, the areas with lowest land values have the highest density and lowest household income and mostly reflect informal urbanization. Figure 7.4 shows the distribution of yearly income per household. We can detect income polarization: most households in Libertador and Sucre have incomes up to US $6,300 per year as
of 1998, while households in Chacao, Baruta, and El Hatillo have incomes higher than $23,800 (except the barrios within Baruta where income is $12,300).

Figure 7.5 shows electoral results for Caracas of the 2004 referendum to end Chavez's presidency. The districts with largest population density and size and the lowest income and lowest land values voted to keep Chávez president. This geographical political distribution thus correlated with socio-economic, political-administrative and spatial factors and has had implications for the use of public space for political demonstrations, especially during April 2002, as discussed in the next section.
Chronology of Political Events in Public Space

This section analyses the political and spatial dimensions of the events prior to and during the April 2002 coup d'etat that forced President Chávez out of office for 43 hours. Significantly, people from many of the sectors that support Chávez in the west of the metropolis – as evidenced in the recent referendum (and in previous and subsequent elections) – have better accessibility to the city centre than people in the sectors that voted against him (figure 7.3). It is important to note, however, that Chávez supporters also hail from other sectors of the city (e.g. Petare, El Valle, and Caricuao) that do not have similar accessibility. Also not all barrios, although close, have ‘good’ accessibility. In other words, although accessibility definitely helped, even more important was the people’s determination to restore Chávez to the presidency. This allowed significant numbers to be present around the Presidential Palace for the days leading up to the coup on 11 April 2002. After Chávez was abducted, supporters of the Chávez government quickly organized and by the next evening had congregated in large groups around the Palace and the Tiuna military fort. This presence and the support of a sector of the military which remained loyal to Chávez derailed the coup.

Precedents

In describing the political process that led to the April 2002 events, we adopt the national government’s denomination of two distinct periods in recent Venezuelan history: the IV Republic for the period beginning with the fall of the last dictatorship in Venezuela in 1958 until 1998–1999, and the V Republic for the period following the election of President Hugo Chávez in 1998 and the subsequent promulgation of a new national constitution in 1999. In each phase, the socio-political construction and use of space have been factors in the definition of the political process.

IV Republic. From the overthow of the last dictator, Marcos Pérez Jiménez, in 1958 until the election of Chávez as president in 1998, Venezuelans elected presidents every five years, usually from the Social Democratic AD (Acción Democrática) or the Social Christian COPEI (Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente) parties. Public events during the campaigns and those for Labour Day and the yearly celebrations of party anniversaries were mostly orchestrated and left little room for spontaneous political demonstrations. The last were mainly restricted to student protests, sometimes supported by some faculty and other university or high school staff and members of smaller political parties. Protests followed a repetitive pattern, often starting peacefully and joyously,
but ending in violent confrontations with the police and sometimes injury and death. In this period, the sites of struggle were mainly restricted to spaces around public high schools (liceos), colleges, and universities. The principal public meetings were limited to the main plazas in the traditional centre of Caracas – Plazas O’Leary and Venezuela – or Bolívar Avenue (closed to traffic for the events). Regular protests in ‘hot spots’ (such as the Plazas Venezuela and Las Tres Gracias, both adjacent to the Central University of Venezuela; and José Antonio Páez Avenue in front of the Pedagogic University) and the resulting traffic jams became predictable rituals. Probably due to the economic crisis, they subsided during the 1980s as less funds were available and because of the deterioration in public safety and disenchantment with traditional political parties.

The El Caracazo or Sacudón of 1989, a social reaction against the neo-liberal policies introduced by the penultimate president of the IV Republic, Carlos Andrés Pérez, and in particular to the increase in public transport tariffs, signalled a break with established rituals. On 27 February, the poor blocked principal avenues and freeways and paralysed the city. The middle- and upper-income classes reacted with fear as their ever-present nightmare seemed to come true – i.e., the poor descending from their barrios on the hills and taking over the city. Expressing frustration, disenfranchised Caraqueños stormed and looted commercial centres and small businesses in a seemingly unorganized and anarchic form. In a brutal clampdown the police and the military killed an unknown number of people – a conservative estimate is 400, but other unofficial estimates place the number at 3,000. Curfews and blockades lasted almost a week and represented a rapidly escalating crisis of representative democracy in the country. After El Caracazo, the challenges to the political establishment became more frequent and prominent. Street protests increased dramatically in Caracas, although some years were more turbulent than others. Subsequently, the perception of Venezuelan social history, as Lopez Maya and Lander explain, changed:

In the early 1980s, Venezuelans were thought of as being one of the least politically mobilized people of Latin America. It was argued that its solid democracy, oiled by the oil rent of the State, had allowed it to establish and to consolidate channels of efficient mediation and representation that kept pronounced social and/or violent conflict at bay... This has been contradicted in the last two decades and has forced the re-examination of ‘street politics’ in Venezuela. (Lopez-Maya and Lander, 2004, p. 1, authors’ translation)
at having to take up arms against citizens during the riots, all culminating in two unsuccessful coups d'etat against the government of Carlos Andrés Pérez in February and November 1992. The former was led by Colonel Hugo Chávez accompanied by other military leaders. From this moment on, a new political movement which had been secretly gestating as a reaction to the political crisis in the country became visible and gathered momentum. In addition, those organizations and movements which were excluded from the Pact of Punto Fijo came together, despite class differences, to achieve the goal of 'democratizing democracy' (García-Guadilla et al., 2004, p. 11). For many Venezuelans, this movement represented an alternative political project that offered greater hope for reform. Finally Pérez was impeached and Rafael Caldera was subsequently elected president in 1993. Falling international oil prices did not help Caldera, and his term was characterized by political instability and general dissatisfaction with the government. Many felt that he betrayed his constituency when he turned to the International Monetary Fund for aid (Ibid.), all of which provoked passionate street demonstrations demanding accountability and justice.

V Republic. The alternative political model, represented by the political parties identified with the project led by Chávez, garnered ample popular support and in 1998 won the national election with 56 per cent of the vote. Chávez assumed the presidency of the country, soon renamed by popular vote Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. His presidency represented an interruption in the domination of AD and COPEI. The approval of a new Constitution in 1999 with 70 per cent of the vote gave definition to the 'peaceful revolution', as government labelled it. Shortly afterwards, new presidential elections were held and Chávez was re-elected for six years with possibility of re-election, as established by the new Constitution. The constitutional reform established a participatory democracy with popular involvement in government decision-making, the valorization of human rights, and the recognition of the multiculturalism of Venezuela.

In addition, the regime emphasizes Latin American integration and openly questions neo-liberal principles and conditions imposed by world financial bodies. Taxes, import duties, and licenses were reinvigorated, the oil industry was renationalized and its management revamped. Land reform (to legalize the occupation of some urban and rural properties and redistribute others), and fishing rights (to control drag-net fishing) ensued. It is generally accepted that this was proof that the Chávez government would encourage substantial reform, if not revolution, alienating in the process sectors of the middle- and upper-income classes. A particularly thorny issue was land reform which lead to the first business shut-down in December 2001 (Wilpert, 2003a).

As a result of constitutional change and its implementation, some vested
interests in the church, traditional political parties, the military, the judicial system, the government bureaucracy, state and private companies, academia, the arts, and the media have been challenged. ‘In countries besieged by extreme inequalities’, García-Guadilla et al. (2004, p. 20) explain, ‘class cleavages create deep divisions making universal proposals difficult to articulate’. Not surprisingly, a strong and vociferous opposition emerged, albeit one that is internally fragmented but with access to substantial economic resources and which dominates the mass media. Initially this appeared as a vigorous democratic opposition, but on 11 April 2002, anti-government forces manoeuvred into a position from which a coup d'état was fomented.

The Events of April 2002

By April 2002, demonstrations and marches gained intensity as Chávez and leaders of the opposition encouraged their followers to take to the streets. Each group sought to demonstrate that it could garner ever greater numbers of participants in different plazas and avenues of the city generating constant controversy over the exact numbers involved. The geography of congregation reflected the lines of class, race, and political affiliation, all of which were highly correlated. Some spaces were even renamed (e.g., Plaza Francia became Plaza de la Libertad (Liberty Plaza)), and exclusively appropriated and guarded by certain groups. These reterritorializations increased existing social and political cleavages.

On 11 April 2002, the opposition marched against Chávez’s government (figure 7.6). From a nondescript space in front of a building of the PDVSA (the state oil company) in Chuao renamed by the opposition group as Meritocracy Plaza, the march proceeded peacefully along the Francisco Fajardo Freeway. Although the legally permitted route was entirely within the Chacao and Baruta municipalities, some leaders of the opposition persuaded the marchers to cross into Libertador towards the Presidential Palace. As the march reached the boundary of Libertador, a group of entrepreneurs and high-ranking officers planned a coup d'état which was supported by representatives of important civic organizations. They attempted to legitimize their sedition by the sheer number of marchers as they resorted to unconstitutional, violent means to depose the president (García-Guadilla et al., 2004).

The political climate in the country had been very tense for months, and credible rumours about the possibility of a coup attempt had surfaced. Therefore, enthusiastic government supporters had surrounded the Presidential Palace for days in a pre-emptive move. When the opposition march reached the area near the Palace on 11 April, security forces managed to keep government and opposition supporters apart, but as a result of what appeared to be sniper gunfire
near the Presidential Palace nearly twenty people were killed (among them eleven pro-government demonstrators) and many others were injured in a span of two hours.17

In the midst of the confrontation, a military force which supported the opposition took over the Presidential Palace, and sequestered Chávez. The opposition then claimed that President Chávez had resigned. From the ‘political vacuum’ an interim government was formed with representatives from the National Business Association (Fedecámaras), the military, and labour unions (CTV) through a previously dominant political party (Acción Democrática). Pedro Carmona Estanga, president of Fedecámaras, proclaimed himself President and in his first TV appearance declared the 1999 Constitution void, dissolved the democratically elected National Assembly, removed ‘Bolivarian’ from the name of the country, repealed the economic decrees instituted by the Chávez government, and dismissed elected state governors and mayors.

In sum, the new president rejected all the new democratic institutions that had resulted from decentralization and that were legitimated through the constituent process and institutionalized in the Constitution of 1999. (García-Guadilla et al., 2004, p. 19)

Even some opposition supporters felt that Carmona had gone too far too soon and were puzzled or shocked by the authoritarian nature of the coup.

Almost all commercial media – TV, press and radio – deliberately distorted information in order to discredit the government and rally the opposition (Kaiser, 2003).18 Government sponsored TV and radio stations were forcibly shut down
by coup supporters. Commercial television stations coordinated a broadcast of government supporters shooting from a bridge giving the impression that they were massacring opposition marchers and President Chávez was falsely held responsible for the assassinations. During the two days of the coup, government sympathizers had to depend on personal and telephone contacts only (even the cell phone service was interrupted).¹⁹

Infuriated Chávez supporters took to the streets in impressive numbers (figure 7.7). The scale of the popular reaction to the coup was totally unexpected.²⁰ During the following two days and in an unprecedented event in Latin America a deposed president was returned to power after popular pressure and a military faction reversed the coup. According to CNN, approximately three million people took to the streets of Caracas, and more in other parts of the country, demanding Chávez’s return to power. Initially these popular uprisings were repressed violently, but their scale made further repression impractical.²¹ In effect, a multitude surrounded the Presidential Palace, encouraged by its reoccupation by the presidential guard who had stayed loyal to Chávez. The ministers and military officials identified with the ephemeral Carmona junta were left to flee through the tunnels of the palace. The crowd outside demanded the rescue of Chávez, and acclaimed him when he returned to Miraflores. Another large group also cordoned off the Tiuna military fort, where false rumours claimed the president was held hostage, and thousands protested and rioted in the streets in several areas of the city.

Figure 7.7. March of government supporters in Bolivar Avenue, 2002.
During the coup, the new junta instigated and/or condoned violent repression, arrested members of the Chavista government and leaders of popular organizations, humiliated them publicly, and even murdered some. More than twenty more people were assassinated in the following days. A large group attacked the Cuban Embassy while the municipal police of Baruta, where the embassy is located, stood by. In fact, the mayor of Baruta, a Chávez opponent, was involved in the attack on the Embassy. The sites of the presidential Palace and the Tiuna Fort, pivotal to restoring Chavez, were in territorio Chavista – parts of the metropolis where Chavez’s supporters represented a large majority. Figure 7.5 shows both locations of the Palace (Parroquia 2, Altagracia) and the Fort (Parroquia 19, El Valle) within or near Chavez strongholds. In addition, figure 7.3 also shows that accessibility to these places was greater for Chavistas. These were important spatial factors that favoured Chavez’s return to the presidency.

The Aftermath of April 2002

The 2002 coup was a wake up call for government supporters not to underestimate the opposition and its tactics. It was a period of great unease but certainly one where government supporters received the ‘whip lash of the opposition’ (a frequent quote of Chávez from Trotsky), motivating the consolidation of their organizations and group solidarity. After the coup, ‘the existential struggle became the primary means of expressing difference’ (García-Guadilla et al., 2004, p. 20). In this existential struggle, the factions in conflict ceased to abide by the rule of law and acted as if survival depended on crushing the other. In such a struggle between the state and a fraction of civil society, as García-Guadilla explains,

the role of regulating or mediating conflict assigned to the State proves difficult to execute. Moreover, when a part of Civil Society does not recognize the legitimacy of the State as mediator and regulator of conflict, this role can no longer be successfully assumed by the State. (Ibid., p. 20)

Intractable conflict ensued. Although the coup of April 2002 failed and many in the opposition felt frustrated by it, the opposition movement gained momentum and some of their leaders felt empowered. They had destabilized the regime and flexed their muscles. Although both the government and the opposition paid lip service to the need for dialogue, conflicts rapidly re-escalated posing a continuous threat to democracy:

[Conflict does threaten the political system when it is ‘antagonistic’ (as happens in Venezuela) because society is not able to define its common collective interest nor is it able to contribute to the general will. Worse yet, when civil society and the State cannot agree upon the definition of the general will because they have antagonistic ideological frameworks (as also happens in Venezuela), then social actors or civil society become...
The opposition tried new strategies—a national stoppage, and later, the ousting of Chávez by a constitutionally-sanctioned referendum—but to no avail. Again, the clash of purposes was forcefully taken to the streets. The central part of the city, where most government institutions are located, has a more traditional, pedestrian-friendly urban grid with many plazas and a few wide and long avenues. In contrast, the formally built housing areas in the western part of the city, where the opposition is a majority, is a much more modern expansion of the city crisscrossed by freeways, with fewer plazas, and a more irregular, less pedestrian-friendly grid. Arguably, this spatial advantage facilitated the congregation of Chavistas. One of the few sites that the two groups shared during the aftermath of April 2002 was the Avenida Bolívar. This avenue had traditionally been the thermometer of political preferences, measured in popular attendance of political meetings during electoral periods during the IV Republic. In this tradition, Chavistas and anti-Chavistas held rallies in the avenue. This, however, posed a greater challenge to the opposition because of the central-eastern location of this avenue, in the midst of an ever more strongly-defined ‘Chavista territory’, leading to reduced use by the opposition.

The opposition used other spatial venues, however. Frequently, they congregated on a freeway node near the military airport of La Carlota. They also held meetings at the PDVSA headquarters. Perhaps the most popular and symbolically powerful site for the opposition was Plaza Altamira or Plaza Francia, renamed Plaza de La Libertad, in Chacao, one of the few large plazas in west Caracas (figure 7.8). It was built as part of a modernist expansion of the city following French aesthetics in a then suburban subdivision designed with garden-city principles. Today, it is at the heart of the ‘anti-Chávista territory’ in the city, and as such was consequently appropriated by opponent groups for all sorts of cultural, political, military, and religious events. Towards the end of October 2002, the plaza was declared ‘liberated territory’ by military officers and representatives of civil society. People congregated day and night, for months, to hear speakers and participate in acts exhorting resistance. Since Chacao Municipality had a mayor openly supportive of overthrowing Chávez, the local authorities, including the local police force, defended the demonstrators despite their probable transgression of local ordinances.

This occupation of Plaza Altamira was short lived. In a violent incident, three deaths blamed on a mentally impaired person scared the crowds from frequenting the Plaza, and fatigue set in after many months without perceived political progress. Neighbours got tired of the noise and litter and even the local mayor, a supporter, at some point wanted to reclaim the plaza to decorate it for
Christmas and return it to the residents. After a Chavista march led by the then Vice-President José Vicente Rangel, the plaza was finally ‘reconquered’. Throughout the crisis and the concomitant dispute over territory, both groups resorted to symbolic warfare, appropriating nationalist and religious symbols. Chávez and his followers adopted the colour red for berets and T-shirts, symbolizing the leftist ‘revolution’. The opposition, on the other hand, used yellow, symbolizing light and hope for a future without Chávez; or black, in sign of mourning. For some, the symbolic use of black alternatively created links, purposely or not, to European fascist movements. Black could also be interpreted as indicative of the diversity of ideological positions in the opposition and also as symbolic of a reactive, rather than an assertive, movement. Massive marches of Chavistas have been called *la marea roja* (the red tide), and those of opponents, *el gusano de luz* (the light worm). In a country with a Catholic majority, Chávez speaks often of Christ as leading his revolution; whereas the opposition invokes the Virgin Mary to get rid of Chávez. Chávez refers intensely to the new Constitution and shows it in many public appearances. The opposition, having voted against it and lost, later invoked it too, for the purpose of legitimizing the recall referendum. Lastly, Simón Bolívar, historical father of the Republic, after being admired by all Venezuelans, has recently turned into a symbol of division: Chavistas venerate him and hold him as the main inspiration of their ‘Bolivarian Revolution’, while anti-Chavistas are torn about what they see as an unwelcome revision of national history (González Deluca, 2005; Romero, 2005; Suazo, 2005).
The polarization continued after the coup, fuelling social imaginaries that constructed the ‘other’ as enemy (Lozada, 2004; Salas, 2004). PDVSA, Fedecámaras, and the Central Labor Union formed an opposition coalition and planned for a general national strike and oil company stoppage to weaken the government and force Chávez’s resignation. Garcí-a-Guadilla et al. (2004, p. 20) describes the conditions as follows:

The 2002 coup d'état did not put an end to the exclusion of the ‘other’ from the normative models proposed by each faction. The General Strike of December 2002 that lasted until February of 2003 carried out by the opposition in defiance to the government is another example of the use of the existential struggle as a means of articulating difference. The main objective of the general strike, called ‘Paro Cívico’ [Civic Stoppage] by the opposition, was to force President Chávez to resign by disrupting the national oil industry. This general strike was called by the Coordinadora Democrática, an entity that represented the alliances established between political parties and social and economic organizations belonging to the opposition. Civil organizations in the opposition supported the strike despite the fact the government did not recognize it as legal and even threatened to fire those public employees participating in it. The threat materialized when more than 5,000 professionals working in the State owned Oil Company, Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA), and its research institute INTEVER were fired. During the two months that the ‘Paro Cívico’ lasted, there were numerous street mobilizations and violent confrontations. The social imaginaries of the opposition and the government fueled the conflict. The government labeled citizens participating in the strike as the ‘enemy’, the ‘traitors’, and the ‘anti-patriotic’. The strike was declared ‘illegal’. The opposition, however, described the strike as a ‘Paro Cívico’ and justified their actions appealing to Article 350 of the Constitution that legitimizes Civil Disobedience. The ‘illegal strike’ or ‘Paro Cívico’ was de-activated only after it proved to be unsuccessful.

Many in the managerial and professional classes joined the strike, while owners of medium and small enterprises and blue-collar workers chose not to. As a result, the strike was unevenly adhered to in the city. Many sectors in the east closed their businesses as streets emptied out, while most sectors in the west, and poorer barrios elsewhere remained bustling with people and activity. Wealthier businesses were more likely to oppose Chávez’s regime and could absorb the cost of a strike. Most small businesses, even if they were not Chávez supporters, could not absorb those costs. At PDVSA, managers for the most part complied with the strike, while many blue-collar workers did not and by defying their bosses recovered the company for the government. Many analysts also referred to the strike as a media event, because of the media’s skewed depiction of the activities in different spaces of the city during the strike (Kaiser, 2003).

The business-owner strike of 2002–2003 and the stoppage of the oil company resulted in an undersupply of gas, a collapse of transportation, and deficits in the
supply of food and other goods. Those most hurt could not afford to hoard large quantities of food nor had space to store them. The middle class was also affected, because of its consumption of products and services imported or denominated in dollars (Wilpert, 2003a, p. 106). Securing gasoline or gas became a daily concern. In the barrios, people formed queues each time gas cylinders (used for cooking) were promised. Wherever lines formed, the surrounding spaces were converted, temporarily, into locations for further political discussion. People also created elements of self-ordering – controlling the lines, sharing knowledge regarding the locations where gas or gasoline were available, and securing some distributional justice.

Those supporting the government occupied key spaces such as the PDVSA headquarters in La Campiña (in Libertador municipality) in a relatively hostile area around the fortress-like headquarters. Those supporting the stoppage camped in the previously mentioned Meritocracy Plaza in Chuao. The experience of the entrepreneurs’ stoppage generated a government reaction and reorganization. Urgent action was needed on the part of the government to avoid risks to the supply of fuel and food. The government’s provision of basic subsistence to lower-income classes (the Mercal mission) was strategic in its effects, and it also was maintained and reproduced after the strike as a way of pre-empting or co-opting events by the opposition (e.g., major open market events held at the time of opposition marches).

**The Opposition Resorts to Violence: the Guarimba**

On 27 February 2004, the fifteenth anniversary of El Caracazo, the opposition marched to recall President Chávez. In Caracas, a meeting of the leaders of unaligned countries (the G15 group) was being held in the Teresa Carreño Theater. For security reasons, the march was refused permission to proceed down Libertador Avenue (the theatre is at the end of the avenue), and violent clashes with the National Guard ensued. In protest, some members of the middle-class went on a three-day rampage, the guarimba, sequestering substantial areas in the east of the city. Guarimba acts continued between February and March 2004 in Caracas and some other Venezuelan cities. The aim was violent disruption of public order to provoke repressive military intervention, delegitimize the government, and provoke international action. Conceived by Robert Alonso, a member of the rightist group Bloque Democrático, the goal was to create an anarchy that would paralyse the country. In its extreme forms, guarimba tactics included burning car tyres and rubbish in public streets, and using homemade explosives like Molotov cocktails and conventional arms. In effect, the media activated a ‘mediatic guarimba’ (according to writer Earle Herrera) by questioning
the legitimacy of public authorities and generating a general ambiance of terror. Fortunately, the call for massive participation in the guarimbas failed. Both support for Chávez and the democratic leanings of Venezuelans, including many from the opposition, doomed it (García Danglades, 2004). The guarimbas were lifted because they were also extremely unpopular as they hampered free movement and littered neighbourhoods (García-Guadilla, 2005).

**The Referendum in August 2004**

In contrast to the antidemocratic coup attempt and the illegal strike, the opposition also made use of the democratic strategy of the recall election, which came as a result of street and political mobilizations in 2003 and 2004. Not since 1998 had the opposition displayed greater democratic strength and organizational potential, which convinced many of the inevitability of victory. The social and spatial segregation of opposition forces reinforced this impression. If everybody they knew, talked to, and encountered in their daily lives shared their political antagonism toward the government, how could they have conceived of not winning the recall? The media openly opposed to Chávez also played a big role in reasserting these perceptions in their biased portrayal of public demonstrations, marches, and exit polls. Government supporters, similarly, rejected the conventional mass media and came to depend on the State TV and radio stations as well as a limited number of alternative publications.

Thus, the participation in extraordinary events in public spaces in Caracas and the treatment of those events by the media had a determining role in the creation of the disparate imagined communities that Venezuelans of different political allegiances constructed as idealizations of their city and nation. The media construction of the opposition's powers was not reflected in the subsequent recall election results which, as depicted in figure 7.5, reconfirmed Chávez in power (with 59 per cent of the votes) and restated the geopolitical segregation of the city. The legitimacy of the elections was confirmed by international observers, including the Organization of American States (OAS) and Centro Carter led by United States ex-president Carter. However, many members of the opposition, in part motivated by some of their political leaders, and influenced by their media-constructed visions, did not recognize what they claimed were fraudulent electoral results. Their reactions were felt in the streets soon after.

**Discussion of Socio-Spatial Dynamics**

In the tensions between the creation and contestation of new political projects, 'imagined communities' are redefined, as are new subjectivities of solidarity.
and belonging. The effect for public space is an unsettling of the traditional meanings of place. Post-traditional revisions of pre-established national history are performed through the validation and weaving in of subaltern stories. Also, the current socio-political condition in Venezuela presents an ever more salient post-glocal dimension, as the global and the local embed in each other in myriad and fluid ways. Today, Venezuela is a main point of reference for comparative case studies conducted by international analysts and scholars. Activists and agencies from around the world participate in Venezuelan politics and in the local politics of public space, many of whom participate in the local marches. In 2006, the World Social Forum was held in Caracas and the Venezuelan president travelled around the world promoting his Bolivarian message and lobbying for Latin American supranational cooperation treaties. Political tourism to the country is growing.

One profoundly liberating transformation has been the way many people, who previously had a hard time barely ‘making life’ in the country, have now become effective subjects capable of ‘making history’ (Flacks, 1988). Thus, perhaps to a scale similar only to that in Cuba, the current process in Venezuela stands out with respect to other case studies in this book in that it reveals the inverse dynamics to the Habermasian notion of the colonization of the ‘lifeworld’ by the ‘system’. The ‘system’ in Venezuela is experiencing critical transformations of yet unknown consequences. As a matter of fact, there are significant disputes among Chavistas as to whether the transformations should be of a reformist or revolutionary nature (Ellner, 2005), as both the national and international opposition to the regime organize powerful challenges to such changes. Paying attention to these dynamics not only can help us understand the unfolding of democracy and citizenship, reforms and revolutions; but also guide us toward more peaceful and just ends.

It is still to be seen how the so-called third-wave democracies of Latin America are transformed by the present ‘grand refuse’. It is still too early to tell whether the current street politics amount to more than a reaction to neo-liberal policies and disenchantment with previous national political regimes and parties, and can catalyse a vision for alternative socio-political projects. But as people take their collective grievances and hopes to the streets, political consciousness is transformed. As the Venezuelan political regime pressures for the advancement of post-neo-liberal policies and practices, the country becomes the referential crest of the tide that is potentially opening Latin America to a new era, raising hopeful expectations for many and profound fears for others. In this process, the limits of both the invited and invented arenas of citizenship are being continuously redrawn (Cornwall, 2002; Miraftab, 2004). Caraqueños and other Venezuelans have taken to the streets of their capital to both denounce the ‘post-justice city’ (Mitchell, 2001) and explore what the ‘just city’ and country can be (Fainstein, 2000). Caracas has thus become the ‘contesting city’ (Cantú Chapa, 2005) or ‘insurgent city’ (Holston
and Appadurai, 1999) *par excellence* in Latin America and as *The New York Times* puts it, the 'new Mecca for the left' (Forero, 2006).

Cultural citizenship in Caracas has been collectively constructed and expanded since 1998 (Delanty, 2002). Citizenship has also been shaped through struggles for rights in the disputes over meanings and practices of participation, the distribution of resources, and boundary-setting between the public and the private, the social and the individual, and the modern and the traditional (Tamayo, 2004). The previously excluded and disenfranchised on the basis of race and class, and also sex, gender, religion, culture, and national origins have reclaimed their citizenship (Kearns, 1995; Miraftab, 1994). But though 'insurgent' (Holston, 1995), it does not necessarily amount to inclusive citizenship (Gaventa, 2002). As these struggles, most of which have been played out as zero-sum games, progressed, others have voluntarily opted out of the current process hoping that their non-participation will delegitimize the Chávez government.

Despite these challenges, inclusive citizenship in Caracas is being constructed as it is being actively performed, fully representing the dynamics of active and performative citizenship discussed by Kearns (1995), Miraftab (1994), and Boudreau (2000), respectively. Concretely, in the recent Venezuelan constitution, citizenship rights have been expanded for women, indigenous groups, and the dispossessed. A gap, however, remains between citizenship as defined by law and as it is enacted in everyday life, described as a 'performative paradox' (Lee, 1998). It is not widening because people challenge the law with their practices making it more inclusive, which is the most common case when a performative paradox is in place. Instead, the novelty of the current performative paradox in Venezuela is that it challenges individual and institutional practices – from all sides of the political spectrum – that do not live up to the expectations created by the new constitution and derived laws. The extraordinary, short-lived events in Caracas's public places continue to have a transformational effect in the city and the nation. These spaces of insurgent citizenship 'engage, in practice, the problematic nature of belonging to society' (Holston and Appadurai, 1999, p. 50), and explicitly challenge the post-justice city as the inequitable result of an unchecked neo-liberalism. For many, they offer hope for the future of the just city, yet its realization is not a given. The difficult trajectory from raising political consciousness to effective political action on progressive policy remains to be traversed. The hurdles are both external, i.e., the national and international opposition to the regime, and internal, as the corruption, opportunism, ineptitude, and exclusionary politics of the IV Republic are not so easily surmounted in the V Republic.

Two of Winocur's (2003) perspectives on citizenship transformation (Chapter 1) are relevant here. Firstly, citizens have rights to quality public space. Accordingly, minority and marginalized groups should have rights to use public space as a
strategy of visibility and survival. This has been accomplished in Caracas to a
great extent by new practices of social interaction and control, consumption and
production of space. Arguably, a sense of responsibilities associated with the use
of the ‘commons’ have not developed at the same pace as notions of rights of use, and
thus problems of maintenance and preservation have in some cases worsened.

The second perspective explores the impact of the media in transforming
participation in the public sphere and in public spaces, which we have shown to
be extensive. The disingenuous portrayal of demonstrations, marches, stoppages,
strikes, riots, and exit polls have all lead to ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson,
1983) and ‘imagined geographies’ (Gregory, 1994) in Venezuela. These are built
on people believing that the city they inhabit is the one that is distortedly re­
presented to them through selected and edited media images and discourses.
Conversely, the media has been cleverly and effectively used to secure and expand
spaces and practices of insurgent citizenship. In effect, the hegemonic role of the
media resulted in an informational ‘grand refuse’ as ‘grass-roots’ communication
(mouth to mouth, computer to computer, and cell phone to cell phone) reversed
the 2002 coup-d'etat.

Thus, the challenge remains for further radicalization of democracy in Venezuela.
This radicalization of democracy has progressed through the repeated legitimation
of this regime through elections, the enactment of a new constitution and laws,
and extending the rights to street politics for all Venezuelans. This, however, has
been hindered by the aforementioned corruption, opportunism, ineptitude, and
exclusionary politics on the part of the government and non-cooperation and
outright sabotaging on the part of national and international opponent elites. To
enable a state of full participation and deliberation, respect for both supporters
and dissenters of the new political regime is necessary.

Final Words

In the complex and ongoing street politics in Caracas discussed in this chapter,
there is a range of reterritorializing and deterritorializing processes at play. From
the point of view of urban space, several points should be remembered. First,
public spaces in Caracas have been the scenes for expressing, both peacefully and
violently, a wide range of political stances both for and against the new regime.
During the coup and its aftermath, public spaces were critical sites for both the
enactment of discontent and the reformulation of citizenship through marching,
chanting, rioting, graffiti, and other street acts, drawn from both traditional and
more insurrectional tactics. Second, beyond the incidents taking place in real­
time/real-space, a critical, superposed dimension to the fatidic April 2002 events
and its aftermath can be identified. It is constituted by the mismatch between
those real and variegated happenings occurring in different areas of metropolitan Caracas, and the virtual city presented simultaneously by the media through the manipulated construction and editing of partial truths. In an attempt to counter manipulated media information, public spaces have been disputed and occupied by the conflicting groups and used as expressions of solidarity and face-to-face communication among members of the same political affiliation.

From the point of view of architecture, public buildings – seats of political and military power in Venezuela – on the one hand and private buildings – headquarters of the media, the oil company, and others in the opposition – on the other, functioned as symbolic icons of power around which the public has gathered. Significantly, both the metropolitan location of these buildings in Caracas and their accessibility from different parts of the city have been crucial.

This study reveals that in Venezuela the challenge remains for political actors to find ways ‘to transform the existential struggle back into a dispute’ (García-Guadilla et al., 2004, p. 20). On the one hand, the state has to regain legitimacy in the eyes of all Venezuelans and to establish bridges to all sectors to negotiate conflict through constitutional means. On the other hand, civil society should strive to define a common collective identity to relate to the state and recognize its mediating role. Urban spaces and buildings have become symbolically and practically imbricated with the ongoing conflicts, enabling social inequalities and polarization in the country to find their expression and contestation in the capital’s urban space. Just as extraordinary events in Caracas’s recent past have marked the current state of events in Venezuela, ordinary places can be catalysts for citizen awareness to manoeuvre from undemocratic existential struggles to a democratic and participatory political culture. In distinguishing between making life and making history (Flacks, 1988), we celebrate that people in Caracas have risen to the challenge of making history through extraordinary political mobilization in public space. We hope that they also seize this unique opportunity to refashion ordinary life into being democratic, inclusionary, and just.

Notes

1. The literature on this is extensive. For syntheses, see Ellner and Hellinger (2004); McCaughan (2004).


3. According to the Oil and Gas Journal and Energy Information Administration, there were eight countries with greater annual oil production than Venezuela, but only five with greater proven reserves, all being in the Middle East (Appenzeller, 2004, pp. 90–91). This underlines the strategic importance of Venezuela to the United States, which is by far the greatest consumer of oil in the world, followed by China and Japan. 13 per cent of US oil imports come from Venezuela (Ibid., p. 89).
4. This approximation belies the difficulty of defining the limits, density, and urban form of self-built squatter settlements which are estimated to house 60 per cent of Venezuela’s population (Architectural League of New York, 2002).

5. The population of Caracas could be larger because figures tend to underestimate the barrio population because of the difficulties of access and of accounting for non-citizen residents. The most populous district, Libertador, had a population of 1.9 million in 2004.

6. This public housing project is composed of 70 buildings with a total of 9,176 apartments, and some community services (schools, markets, etc.). It is named to mark the ousting of the last dictator Pérez Jiménez in 1958. Originally planned for 60,000 inhabitants, today it is home to 76,000 people. Counting the self-built houses between buildings, the area’s total population is in the hundreds of thousands. The area population is particularly politicized, and it is within walking distance of the Miraflores presidential palace.

7. These municipalities were created by the division of the old Sucre District in the municipal reforms of 1989.

8. There are some important disparities in the statistics found for this period. In this quote, the percentage of poor are different from the figures given above. Additionally, the figure of 60 per cent middle class in 1982 more or less corresponds to the ‘not poor’ category in other accounts, but this category is not necessarily equivalent to ‘middle class’.


10. It is important to bear in mind that Caracas is multinucleated, it has a rapid transportation system (the Metro), and the majority of people in poor areas do not own autos, all of which affects land values.

11. The constitution of 1811 marked the beginning of Venezuela’s I Republic, but since the Caracas criollo elite failed to rally popular support for the cause of independence, a racially defined civil war marred the early years. In 1813, Simón Bolívar captured Caracas, where he was proclaimed ‘The Liberator’ establishing the II Republic. But by 1814, enemy troops forced Bolivar and his army out of Caracas, bringing an end to the II Republic. Although Caracas remained in royalist hands, the 1819 Congress at Angostura (present-day Ciudad Bolivar) established the III Republic with Bolivar as president. In 1821, Bolivar’s troops finally liberated Caracas from Spanish rule. Nearly a century and a half of military rule ensued until 1959. This stark break with the past has been attributed to oil-based wealth, which gave government the material resources to win the population over to democracy, and to the spirit of cooperation among the nation’s various political entities as embodied in the Pact of Punto Fijo. In another 1958 pact, the ‘Declaration of Principles and Governing Program’, the main political parties (AD, COPEI, and the URD) agreed on a range of matters with respect to the economy, including the rights of association and collective bargaining, and state subsidies for the poor. The objective was to institutionalize a ‘prolonged political truce’ in favour of the democratic project. The ‘Spirit of the 23rd of January’ informed the 1961 constitution, which guaranteed a wide range of civil liberties, instituted a weak bicameral legislature, and strong executive powers. The major group excluded from the political pacts of 1958 was the extreme left (Haggerty, 1993, np).

12. Owing to the discovery that the government had buried civilians in mass graves and not counted those deaths.

13. In the 1958 Pact of Punto Fijo, president Betancourt granted concessions to a broad range of political forces, but yet managed to maintain the hegemony of the main political
parties, especially AD and COPEI. Other groups were excluded from the political pacts, particularly the leftists (Haggerty, 1993, np). Chavistas conceived the Pact of Punto Fijo as an essential symbol of the IV Republic.

14. The new oil law ‘limited foreign companies to 50 joint ventures and doubled the royalties to be paid to the state per barrel of extracted oil. It also for the first time imposed an accounting and fiscal transparency on the murky operations of PDVSA, and contained provisions allowing the government to restructure the petroleum industry in due course’ (Wilpert, 2003a, p. 107).

15. See Wilpert (2003a); Vila Planes (2003); Camejo (2002); and Medina (2001) for a more detailed description of these reforms and their implications.

16. Chávez had claimed PDVSA’s managers were committed to neo-liberal agendas which favoured foreign interests. Their status threatened, PDVSA’s leading technocrats claimed they alone had the technical expertise necessary to run the company. In their defence, the space in front of the PDVSA building was renamed Meritocracy Plaza.

17. Rodriguez (2005, p. 191), who was attorney general (fiscal) at the time of the coup, gives the following names of the sharpshooters: Roberto Francisco McKnight, Roger de Jesús Miquilena, Franklin Manuel Rodriguez, Jorge Hernán Meneses, Jesús Antonio Meneses, Nelson Enrique Rosales and John Carlos Garzón. This last person was Colombian, another one was from Panama, McKnight was from the US and Jesús Lugo Miquilena had a false Venezuelan ID’ (our translation). Not all those killed were demonstrators, some local workers were caught in the fray too.

18. What the commercial television channels did not show was the street below the Llaguno Bridge, which was empty except for the Metropolitan Police. The manipulation of information is evident in the documentaries Puente Llaguno, Clave de una masacre (Palacios, 2004b) and The Revolution Will Not Be Televised (Bartley and O’Briain, 2003). Puente Llaguno obtained the first prize in the Latin American Documentary Festival 2004, and the General Public award in Spain’s Film Festival 2005. The Revolution Will Not Be Televised has also won numerous international awards.

19. Given these circumstances, one of the most notable aspects of the organization of the demonstrations in favour of Chávez was the capacity to communicate by alternative means. This confirms the importance of face to face contacts in public spaces – locally called radio ‘bemba’ (popular term for mouth, referring to oral communication).

20. This is so considering that government supported TV and radio stations were closed down by coup sympathizers, and that commercial channels were showing only comics and feature films. The only information some Venezuelans had access to was that broadcast by international cable channels such as CNN.

21. The Metropolitan police played a major role, encouraged by the then Metropolitan Mayor Peña who supported the coup. By this time, however, large factions of the military forces had declared their loyalty to the Constitution and the democratically elected government, making systematic violence difficult to maintain or to justify. Meanwhile, an involvement of the US government in the coup had been claimed, and the US did publicly recognize Carmona’s government. We could suppose that the US government dropped its official approval later because it would have been difficult to justify support for a regime that had adopted measures that seriously violated human rights.

22. An NGO of coup victims (ASOVIC) lists 19 people killed on 11 April, and 27 between the 12th and the 14th.

23. The Cuban Embassy was attacked because it symbolically represents the communist ideology many opponents of Chávez claim is embraced by his regime.

24. The mayor of Baruta, Henrique Capriles Radonski, was charged in relation to his participation in the violent Cuban Embassy siege in Caracas between 9 and 13 April 2002. The main evidence against him can be found in celebratory footage aired by commercial TV. See the documentary Asegio de una Embajada (Palacios, 2004d).

25. This plaza continues to symbolize opposition to the government and is always a reference in the spasmodic protests against the government, as happened during the time of the guarimbas.
26. For instance, TV channels selectively showed streets in the anti-Chavista areas of the city where businesses were closed, denoting compliance with the stoppage.

27. This building is typical of the modern, fortress style public buildings of the IV Republic, which erected real and symbolic barriers between the public, especially the poor sectors, and the officials who were supposed to be serving them.

28. The 1999 Constitution provides for a recall of elected representatives after they have served half their term. It is claimed that the Venezuelan Constitution is the only one in the world that sanctions a presidential recall.

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