

Vol. 6, No. 2, Winter 2009, 144-172

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## **Social Images of Anti-Apocalypse: Bikers and the Representation of Popular Politics in Venezuela<sup>1</sup>**

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Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.

“Revelations,” Chapter 6

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is part of a book in progress titled *Dangerous People: Hegemony, Popular Mobilization and Representation in Venezuela*. Some sections were presented at “Narco-Epics Unbound: New Narrative Territories, Affective Aesthetics, and Ethical Paradox”, Center for Latin American Studies, Department of Hispanic Languages and Literatures, University of Pittsburgh, April 4-5, 2008. I thank Martin Herlinghauss for his comments to an earlier version of this work. *Gracias a todos los motorizados que conversaron conmigo mientras rodábamos por Caracas*.

I would like to dedicate these pages to Arquímedes A. Franco, who in his role of leader of *La Fuerza Motorizada*, opened many doors for my research. Arquímedes was gunned down in 2007, “*en su caballo de hierro*,” as he used to call it, and in an incident that has yet to be well investigated. He shared his writings with me, and generously allowed my presence among his group. He revealed to me the strategic value of the semblance of a “Rider of the Apocalypse,” when playing on urban myths and phobias surrounding *motorizados*.

Con nuestros caballos de hierro somos parte de la historia del proceso revolucionario en Venezuela...

Arquímedes A. Franco, *Fuerza Motorizada Bolivariana*

(...) the subaltern is the name of the place which is so displaced from what made me and the organized resister, that to have it speak is like Godot arriving on a bus."

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

*I*

*Godot arrives on a motorcycle*

The idea in Spivak's epigraph, quoted above, has produced heated debates over decades. The core of such discussions is the impossibility of restitution through hegemonic discourse, of voices that have been marginalized due to any condition of subalternity. As we may recall, she defined the terms for resolution through dialog—"to learn to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the historically muted subject of the non-elite" (27)—while others remind us of the conundrum of a project that seeks to shed light into "[the] blind-spot where understanding and knowledge is blocked" (Young 164). John Beverley has compared this particular impossibility to the Lacanian Real that resists all forms of representation: "a gap-in-knowledge that subverts or defeats the presumptions to 'know' (...)" (2). Whether or not these theoretical stands constitute a form of epistemological fatalism, or the necessary attempt to avoid any form of cooptation/paternalism in relation to marginalized subjects, the possibility exists that we face today a unique moment regarding the "silence of the subaltern," in light of the political and cultural phenomena taking place in Latin America.

This essay moves away from the conundrums of representation to explore the potential of radical experiences taking place on the periphery, or rather, in the interstices of Venezuelan urban life. We may want to call this phenomenon "a return of the Real;" for I will be talking about the emergence of a subject that was thought to have been contained on the

margins of society as a differed, apocalyptic presence. This subject has, however, been circulating through the cities of Venezuela for years, breaking some laws, creating unwritten norms of sociability, and many forms of resistance. I will be referring to a subject whose political rationality and agency seemed unthinkable, whose actions are usually explained in terms of atavism, and whose emergence in the public sphere has been articulated in terms of trauma among well-to-do *Caraqueños*. In short, I will be talking about a phenomenon that has been growing in the city of Caracas over the last three decades: the emergence of bikers as agents of a socio-political praxis that emerges from the urban and social periphery, revealing the political substance of life itself; that is, the radical possibilities of daily life appropriations of the urban space. To revisit Spivak's quote, what I will discuss here is the arrival of Godot on a motorcycle, and the perplexity this raises in hegemonic culture.

Before continuing, it is important to note that the bikers in question are neither the "Easy Rider" type nor the Hells Angels<sup>2</sup>.



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQJZ5kAOBpQ>

My biker references are to a heterogeneous group of the working class. They can be described as a force now composed of several thousand<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The equivalent to these US models do exist in the country and they are often marked by a class distinction. Other groups of bikers define themselves in direct opposition to the working class bikers I will be dealing with in this article. Venezuelan members of LAMA (Latin American Motorcyclists Association), for example, speak of improving the guild's image. They see themselves *not* as representatives of a work force, but as part of "familias de buena conducta y grados morales"... See: <http://www.lamacaracas.com/regulaciones/index.htm>

previously non-unionized delivery personnel who move packages and mail, facilitate banking transactions or other errands, and provide transportation services in *moto-taxis* in Venezuela's larger cities. I will therefore use their name in Spanish, *motorizados*.

In this article I offer a reflection on the dynamics of affect generated by Venezuelan *motorizados*, particularly in relation (or reaction to) their mobilization and activism. The point I'd like to make is that *some* phobic reactions observed in the imaginary about *motorizados* may function in direct correlation to their emergence as new political subjects, as well as to their radical and often violent re-writing of the city. The phenomenon is extremely complex, as these processes must be seen in relation to 1) the rise of an informal economy, 2) social movements and, in some occasions, 3) to criminal activity. I will therefore read such reactions as mediatic analogs of what Ranajit Guha called "prose of counter-insurgency;" that is, a discourse that represents the subaltern subject as pre-political or barbaric, especially when rebellion occurs. The anti-apocalyptic reading advanced in these pages is, in this sense, a "writing in reverse" (Guha). The scope of my analysis will be framed within four key moments in contemporary Venezuelan history. My first "brief stop" is the 1950s, when the city of Caracas experienced violent modernization.



*Motorizados* protest in Caracas, 2001.

Next, I visit 1970s, within the context of Venezuela's oil boom and the first presidency of Carlos Andrés Pérez. I follow with the role of

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<sup>3</sup> A census conducted by *Instituto Autónomo de Seguridad Ciudadana y Transporte* (Insetra) in 2002 indicates that, only in the city of Caracas, there are 40.000 registered bikers. The actual *motorizado* population can easily double if not triple this number, as many of them are not register by state records.

*motorizados* in the popular revolts known as *El Caracazo*, on February 27, 1989. I end with the events of April 11, 2002, when a *coup d'état* against Hugo Chavez was quickly reversed by popular mobilization and key participation by *motorizados*. Within this temporal framework, I deal with examples drawn from literature, mainstream media, and film. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to conduct interviews in Caracas in 2002 and 2005, also gaining access to writings by *motorizados* that circulated as photocopies and pamphlets.

## II

### *Motorizados: Producers of Smooth Spaces*

As a work force, *motorizados* are essential to the urban dynamics of a city like Caracas: they are messengers, they are moto-taxi drivers, and delivery personnel. Some have even diversified into mobile shops that sharpen tools or repair shoes. It is also true that some have applied their mobility to the tasks of *moto-banquistas*—a particular type of bank robber, — *arreatadores* who snatch jewelry or money from their bikes—, *sicarios*—hit men—, and other sophisticated forms of delinquency. Success in these fields depends on their flexibility and mobility, which allow them to navigate successfully through streets crippled by heavy traffic. Their cohesive culture has created defense and solidarity mechanisms for surviving accidents or abusive employers, as well as the lack of legislation to protect them.

Ubiquitous and agile, they go against traffic, weave through lanes, cross over sidewalks, and use pedestrian walkways. The unwritten rule says they always have the right of way. To flee an accident involving them is not a good idea. Such practices allow them to redesign space and forms of sociability. In Deleuze's and Guattari's terms, one could say that they transform urban "striated spaces" into "smooth spaces," like the ocean and the desert, forcing the collapse of the order imposed by the state<sup>4</sup>. They are, at times, a feared and hated "revolutionary machine."

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<sup>4</sup> Following Deleuze and Guattari, one can say that "smooth spaces" are open to creative movement in any direction; they are composed of trajectories rather than destinations; they are filled by events rather than things. The creative

*Motorizados* therefore present the ambivalence that Bhabha identifies in the Other as desired and disavowed. They are essential to the flow of the city, but they are also nomadic subjects who escape state machines and impose their own subversive machine. On one hand, they elicit sympathy as fundamental elements of the economy; on the other, they are feared. In some mutations, they become a creative-revolutionary machine that threatens the hegemonic order, as recent popular revolts have shown.

### III

#### *Motorcycle of the Jungle*

In the 1950's when Caracas is experiencing a vigorous process of modernization and growth, Julio Garmendia's literary image of a bike without a *motorizado* might signal the absence of the troubled subject that would emerge towards the 1980'.



In a short story written in the 1950s but unpublished until very recently, Julio Garmendia (1898-1977) narrates the fantastical story of a German motorcycle that immigrates to Venezuela. The bike arrives at

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as well as the subversive nature of such a practice becomes evident in nomadic subjects par excellence, such as *motorizados*.

Puerto Cabello and “(...) as soon as it could, escaped, rebelled, fled to the wilderness and got deep into the tropical forest by its own will and means (...) Loose and free, it could now run through the forests and swamps, without a driver or gas”(37). The writing of the short story coincided with a period of violent modernization in Caracas, when an important flow of internal and foreign immigrants arrived in the city. It was also a time of large projects in metropolitan revitalization, which sought to rationalize the urban space that was until then characterized for its dispersion and provincial appearance. But Garmendia is not as concerned with the influx of the rural population that would lead to today’s large slums as he is with the intersection of “the machine”—modernity—with the “atavist” and “magic” reality of the country. His conclusion envisions that in the conflict between civilization and barbarism, the latter will succeed: “Lately, for example, (...), it was said, that branches had grown on it, in the form of a beard reaching the ground” (46)<sup>5</sup>. We don’t face here the threat of the *motorizados*, but that of the “tropics,” which transforms German engineering into a supernatural and wild object<sup>6</sup>. Paradoxically, as we will see later, the apocalyptic imaginary of urban riots and violent bikers doesn’t arrive until the full deployment of Venezuela’s peripheral modernity—the same modernity that is the subject of Garmendia’s fantastic narrative world—and the collapse of its promises in the 1980s.

### III

#### *A Rascal on Wheels*

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth remembering that this ideologeme of “civilization versus barbarism” is well established in Venezuelan thought, as seen in the narrative of Rómulo Gallegos. Nevertheless, two elements mark a significant difference with such tradition: Garmendia’s work belongs to a radically different literary trend that seems to depart from the foundational gestures of the latter. Finally, the moralizing or pedagogical gesture that characterizes Latin American approaches to Sarmiento’s dichotomy is clearly absent from Garmendia’s work.

<sup>6</sup> An excellent study of Julio Garmendia’s work and his contribution to an early critique of our Modernity is Javier Lasarte’s *Juego y nación: Postmodernismo y vanguardia en Venezuela*. Equinoccio: Caracas, 1995. This critique concludes that Garmendia is, in Venezuela, “un fundador del sentido posmoderno de la modernidad” (“a founder of a postmodern sense of modernity”) (60).

A well-known comedy in Venezuelan cinema, *Se solicita motorizado con moto propia y muchacha de buena presencia* (Dir. Alfredo J. Anzola, 1977), marks a telling moment in the construction of an imaginary of bikers. The movie was produced during the “golden years” of our national cinema, and very faithfully records the culture generated due to the rise in oil revenue. Anzola’s movie departs from an important group of films at the time that deal with the topic of politics and delinquency, opting for the creation of a “*picaresca criolla*” (Molina 79).

The plot is simple: Alexander, a *motorizado* (performed by the well known sax player Víctor Cuica), and his friend Diosa (Brigitte Tirone), start new jobs in a furniture store. When Alexander suspects that his boss is involved in some kind of illegal business, he decides to trick him by ripping him off: “*Ladrón que roba a ladrón; tiene cien años de perdón.*” He successfully performs his task, without developing a class discourse, and without ceasing to be amusing and quick-witted. The *motorizado* is here a trickster who scams the dishonest upper classes, without threatening or agreeing with political projects that are radical in nature. The following clip is the closing sequence of the film, when Alexander enjoys success and



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uEE91kJsEr4>

escapes to the beach with Diosa. Here resides the core of his motivations, the ultimate goal of his actions, as well as the limit of any political impulse.

The audience is left reassured; everything remains in place or, should we say, in ‘its’ place. *Se solicita motorizado...* is structured upon a

gaze that is, at once, comical and ethnographic: while following this picturesque character we safely go into the slums where he lives; we comfortably witness his habits and listen to his hyper-codified and witty language. This is not a biker from the juvenile gangs of the sixties, whose mostly upper class members were inspired by US models; neither is he a participant in the popular revolts that would take place in the later decades. He is a wage-earning, Afro-Venezuelan who lives in a shack; he is a non-threatening “*pícaro*” on wheels. Julio Garmendia’s “motorcycle of the jungle” now has a driver; a humorous character for whom certain mischievous actions are allowed under the spirit of the “petro-populist romance” of the Carlos Andrés Pérez’ first government.

#### IV

#### *Informal Economies and New Political Subjects*

In the decade between 1980–1990, the economic crisis that affected other parts of Latin America also contributed to a significant increase in Venezuela’s informal economy. Traditional studies have interpreted this as mere commercialization of goods and services without legitimate organization, and often under illegal circumstances. New research shows, nevertheless, that this informal strand is an important part of the general economy and culture, also generating new political subjects. Street vendors with varieties of goods, along with *motorizados*, are part of this new economic, cultural and political landscape. Through mobilization and protest, they articulate their demands on the streets of Caracas<sup>7</sup>.

During those years, a clear pattern of representation emerged, targeting *motorizados* as a threatening presence. Not by chance, a complex body of legislation accompanied this imaginary as means to control their actions<sup>8</sup>. To say that crime by *motorizados* contributed its fair share

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<sup>7</sup> For a study of demonstrations among members of the informal economy at that time in Venezuela, see López-Maya, Smilde y Stephany.

<sup>8</sup> Important regulations were implemented in 1985 (*Decreto Presidencial* 33.175, 1985) and continued through the 2000s. More recently, under Freddy Bernal’s mandate as mayor of Caracas’s largest municipality, the regulations were changed with significant input by *motorizados*. See “Ordenanza sobre los

to this reaction is not completely accurate, because *moto-banquistas* and *sicariato* already permeated this culture, beginning in the seventies<sup>9</sup>. Two other circumstances may have prompted this cultural/legal discourse: the irregular but constant organization of this sector of the working class, as well as their radical presence in the streets (or one might say, their radical performance in public spaces).

A turning point in this process was the popular revolt of February 27, 1989, known as *El Caracazo*<sup>10</sup>. On that occasion, *motorizados* played a crucial role by not only coordinating looting, resistance to police and military brutality, but also in defending the population that descended from the slums to take food and other goods. Yolanda Salas was one of the few who properly evaluated the importance of this sector as an agent of political praxis during the events of February 27, 1989:

Se ha señalado como un elemento propagador de los disturbios y los saqueos a los 'motorizados'. Ellos, en sus motos, formando grupos, fueron vistos recorriendo la ciudad, haciendo circular las últimas noticias relacionadas con los disturbios. A semejanza de su quehacer diario, fueron eficaces propagadores de información, tan sólo que esta vez no cargaban mensajes de casas comerciales o de oficinas gubernamentales sino de sus congéneres de clase. Con sus motos encabezaban grupos de gente, a quienes les abrían camino e instigaban a tomar las vías públicas. Su liderazgo fue más efectivo que el de las voces autorizadas de los partidos políticos, quienes hasta ese momento se habían mantenido en silencio y ausentes de los medios de comunicación. Un grupo de motorizados trató de tomar por asalto una estación de televisión y el edificio de FEDECÁMARAS, organismo que representa los intereses del empresariado venezolano. Aunque la tarea resultó infructuosa, es importante señalar el carácter político y social que tuvo esa acción. (67)

During the mid to late 1980s, a new sector of the working class gained prominence, emerging from the informal economy created by the

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motociclistas o motorizados y la ordenación y control de circulación de motocicletas o motos en el Municipio Libertador del Distrito Capital." Last year, when new reforms were introduced without consultation with the biker's guild, a large protest took place, paralyzing the city of Caracas.

<sup>9</sup> One of the most well known crimes of that decade was the murder by hire of the lawyer Ramón Carmona Vásquez, in 1978. In this case, the *sicarios* turned out to be part of a corrupt group within the police.

<sup>10</sup> A fundamental work on *El Caracazo* is Fernando Coronil and Julie Skurski's "Dismembering and Remembering the Nation: The Semantics of Political Violence in Venezuela."

neo-liberal adjustments at the time. Cast as “*lumpen*,” they are nevertheless agents of cultural production and social change. Frequently perceived as “riders of the apocalypse,” they have been active and rebellious in ways that systematically escape our traditional understanding of politics.

*Pandemonium, la capital del infierno* (Dir. Román Chalbaud, 1997) might suggest a synthetic vision of that post-*caracazo* “new Venezuela,” and the representational gap of emerging social subjects.<sup>11</sup> The film is a surreal melodrama staged in a decadent country, where Adonai (Orlando Urdaneta), an amputee poet, resides in—or presides over—a crumbling building where he reads poetry and news aloud, addressing the indifferent slum that surrounds him. This may also represent the disgust and impotence of an intelligentsia unable to grasp the profound transformations that have occurred; but more importantly, it signals their distance from those social actors that would very soon occupy a front row seat in the political imaginary of the country: the masses of dispossessed, *las turbas*.

Two other characters, the brothers Hermes (Jesús Luis Márquez) y Onésimo (José Luis Useche), small-time crooks, appear in a scene that might condense the references to class-race that prevail in the portrayal of working class bikers: *monos en motocicleta*<sup>12</sup>. In that particular scene, Hermes y Onésimo assault Demetria ‘La Perra’, with whom they eventually develop a romantic relationship.

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<sup>11</sup> In the double meaning of the word: to depict and to legally represent.

<sup>12</sup> In Venezuela, people of lower classes, assumed to be dark skinned, are pejoratively called *monos* (monkeys). For a study of the racial dynamics of Venezuela today, see my “The Color of Mobs: Racial Politics, Ethno-populism and Representation in the Chávez Era” (Forthcoming in *Participation, Politics and Culture in Venezuela’s Bolivarian Democracy*. Duke University Press, Daniel Hellinger and David Smilde Editors).



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D6fFNoct5as>

Only four years after the release of *Pandemonium, la capital del infierno*, Venezuela would fully enter a period of radical transformations; what Smilde and Hellinger have termed “The Chavez Era.” In this new environment, *motorizados* will have an even more visible presence in the political and economic arena.

In 2001, the Bolivarian government issued the “Ley Especial de Asociaciones Cooperativas” (Nº 37285 del 18-09-2001), which provided a legal framework for a key feature of the new economy: the cooperative movement. Although a small number of these organizations existed well before the advent of the Hugo Chávez government, they have now multiplied by the thousands<sup>13</sup>, becoming a central axis of Venezuela’s new developmental strategy, termed “endogenous development.” Modeled after Osvaldo Sunkel's *Development from Within: Toward a Neostructuralist Approach for Latin America* (1993), the program calls for import substitution policies that prioritize equity, human development, and growth in concert with local conditions. Within this context, *motorizados* organized transport cooperatives, which were tremendously successful in

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<sup>13</sup> As of August 2005, SUNACOOOP (Superintendencia Nacional de Cooperativas) registered a total of 83,769 cooperatives; by 2008, there were 250,000 of which, properly speaking, only a smaller percentage are active.

negotiating demands with the State and gaining access to lines of credit and increases in their income earning potential.

These strides have generated conflict, as the close relationship of one sector of the bikers' movements with the State has generated deep hatred among those who oppose Chávez government, as well as concern among those who support the president and aspire to maintain their autonomy. The contradictions of this alliance are the subject of a forthcoming article,<sup>14</sup> but I would like to reiterate the media representations' inability to grasp the political potential of this group. In the following newspaper cartoon, the criminalization of bikers is evident when the artist associates the transportation cooperatives (the moto-taxis, specifically) with kidnappings and murders for hire. Such suggestions overlook the fact that these workers are in fact subjected to tremendous violence and labor insecurity. They are the victims of a significant number of robberies;<sup>15</sup> the rate of serious accidents is high; and, due to the characteristics of the informal economy, they have virtually no benefits. One *mototaxista* declared: "Nosotros (...) estamos a la buena de Dios, si un carro nos estropea, no tenemos un seguro que nos respalde; nos dejan allí tirados y huyen, y eso sin contarle cuando nos roban las motos, nos matraquean. Para algunos conductores, pareciera que motorizado no es gente" (October 18, 2008).

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<sup>14</sup> See note 17.

<sup>15</sup> Only in 2008, more than 9.450 bikes were reported stolen (División de Vehículos del CICPC).



What is the suggestion in this image? Are the thousands of members of the transport cooperatives involved in criminal activities? This kind of representation tends to erase the political will and the economic viability of a heterogeneous guild. (Published in *El Universal*)

## VI

### *Riders of the Apocalypses*

*Motorizados* generate a communication network of great efficacy in a city with inefficient services and overwhelming traffic<sup>16</sup>. This is one of paradoxes of this subject when it is turned into a “war machine,” and the messages circulated are not those that sustain the flow and accumulation of capital, but those that subvert it, as happened during the popular revolt known as *el caracazo*.

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<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to point out that with the rise in oil revenue, the purchase of cars increased substantially in Venezuela. This increment in vehicles contributed in turn to make the already congested city of Caracas, for example, almost impossible to circulate. This situation turned out to be beneficial for the *moto-taxi* cooperatives that gained numerous clients who sought their ability to bypass traffic.



This might be one of the most famous images of *El Caracazo*. Photographers Francisco Solórzano and Tom Grillo provide a glimpse into the brutal repression displayed by the State during the events of February 27, 1989. More importantly for my purposes, they capture the many forms of solidarity displayed by the common citizen that took over the streets during those days.

It is therefore against such a war machine that others are created, closer to the State and the economic interests that seek to neutralize the former. The legal apparatus has produced a significant body of regulations to control *motorizados*, but I am also thinking of the media machine that produces and reproduces representations crucial for the consolidation of hegemony. If the law seeks to limit and contain the fluidity of these unruly bodies that circulate throughout the city, then media images seek to produce certain ideas about their identities and the reasons for their actions. The ultimate consequence of both processes is the criminalization of *motorizados*.

In Venezuela, the conflict between both machines (the *motorizado*-war-machine and the media-machine) became evident on April 13 2002, with the overthrow of president Hugo Chávez Frías. On that day, privately owned television stations and newspapers imposed self-censorship to erase massive reactions against the coup, as they were taking place in numerous

slums of Caracas. Once more, *motorizados* took over the streets as they had done in the 1980s, to exchange information, and to mobilize a significant amount of people for the purpose of restoring presidential power. One thing was radically different in 2002: these “mobs on wheels” were not challenging State power per se, but rather trying to bring back a government with which they identified. One of them wrote:

En Caracas existía una casería de brujas; pero, clandestinamente, a las 10:00 pm del 12-A, logramos reunirnos y se decide la retoma del Palacio Blanco de Miraflores a primera hora. Decidimos adelantar la estrategia y traerse desde Petare una turba de gente (...) Observé un sentimiento popular que nunca he visto en mi vida. [Cuando la gente vio] la masa de motorizados que tupía toda la autopista, de manera impresionante se animó (Manuscrito Franco).



Due to pressure on the media, some images emerged. The way these were transmitted reveals the impossibility of representing subalternity. On the Radio Caracas Televisión, Venevisión and Televén broadcasts, cameras are “protected” inside the buildings while the “mob on wheels” demonstrates outside. What was missing in these representations was the rationale for the actions of scores of people that descended from the

shantytowns to reject a *coup d'état*; the political articulation of a popular movement on wheels.



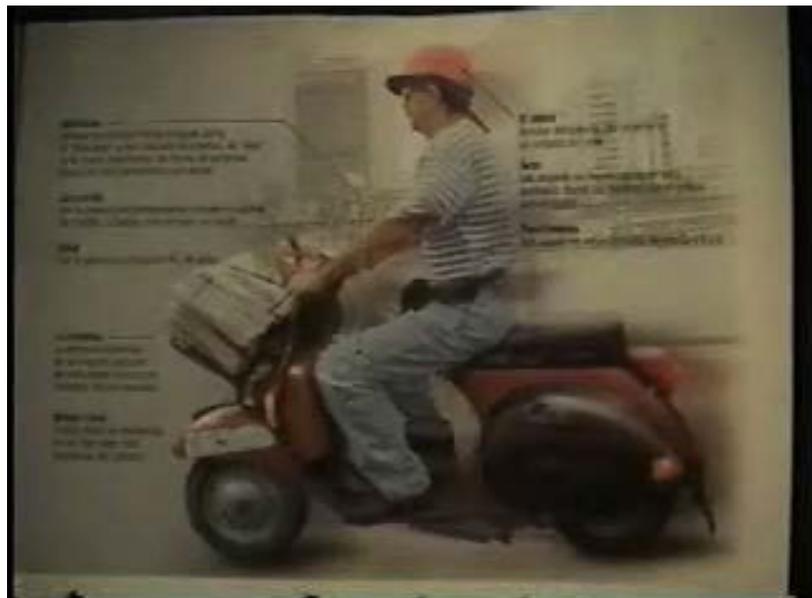
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9TEbkT94aWE>

As a mob, they were undifferentiated, faceless. When the commentators address the scene they invariably describe it as barbaric, irrational, and violent. Another video from Televen is useful to contextualize what is happening. The “mobs” demand mediation in order to express their political rationale. Their demand is clear: “queremos que nos escuchen” [“We want to be heard”]. At this stage, it’s worth asking if the stones thrown that day at some TV stations were just one form, desperate perhaps, to claim representation/mediation. In other words, an attempt to force the gaze of the Other; an attempt to force the encounter with the face-of-the-Other.

One of the *motorizados* who participated in these events later wrote: “the media said the chavista mobs on their bikes didn’t allow them to broadcast (...) this is false (...) the aggression against R.C.T.V. was in the afternoon not in the morning (...) We had invited them to get on Our Iron Horses so they could cover the Popular Power taking over, but they didn’t” (manuscrito Franco, 12). Quite explicitly, a display of violence is not only

recognized, but is also interpreted, placed in the context of a political rationality that demands visibility.

The anxiety to dissect, categorize and interpret these subversive subjects is, by now, evident. In a widely circulated magazine throughout Venezuela, *Primicia*, the topic of *motorizados* was addressed in relation to the eighth anniversary of *El Caracazo*. The writer's and the specialists' overriding opinions—she interviews (sociologists primarily)—deny any possibility of an encounter with “the face of the other,” much less the possibility of acknowledging political agency and rationality. In the article, their actions are seen as “pure spontaneity,” lacking political substance and representing mere impulse.



The graphics above, which accompany the main article, not only reproduce the language of *motorizados* in a comical manner, but do so in a way that reminds us of 19th Century glossaries from a Nativist novel. The text becomes an inventory of language for an extravagant other. He is described and, over all, translated for a reader who is obviously foreign to such an exotic and transgressive dweller of the city. Text and image dissect and de-codify this rebellious subject, whose political agency is forever erased. Mary Louise Pratt wrote about the social sciences and their tendency to react against difference by producing discourses that normalize its disturbing nature; media seem to work here along those lines.

The article ends with the presence of “the ghost,” in Žižek’s sense: a subaltern emerges in a dangerous manner when he/she reveals his/her agency: “Nobody guarantees, in the opinion of sociologies and politicians, that in the future, *motorizados* will not use the same undesirable mechanisms of pressure. To stop traffic by turning off the engines, play football in the highway, that is, do whatever they want (...)” (*Primicia* No.167, 2001).

Another example of this kind of discourse is in an article by a well-known historian, Manuel Caballero. In his piece, entitled “*Los motorizados del terror*” (“Bikers of Terror”), the author compares these workers to the motorcycle squadron of the SS, and concludes that they are “noisy squadrons of terror”: “Por eso, cuando se habla del ejército paralelo que Chávez está formando para eliminar o cuando menos neutralizar a las Fuerzas Armadas, conviene fijar la vista en esos escuadrones, esos epígonos de la SS, en esos ruidosos escuadrones del terror.” (“Los motorizados del terror”, *El Universal*, 22 /09/2002).

The dramatic tone of this text brushes aside the memory of those groups of upper-class bikers that, only a few weeks earlier, had taken over the streets during the general strike of 2002, threatening businesses that would dare open their doors. Caballero doesn’t consider the fact that some bikers—regardless of social class—are not with the government and, on the contrary, see themselves aligned with the Opposition<sup>17</sup>. However, his

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<sup>17</sup> During the elections of 1998, Salas Römer tried to incorporate the image of *motorizados* in his electoral campaign. The gesture implicitly acknowledges the

suggestion that some *motorizados* have functioned as an intimidating presence in favor of the government is not wholly misguided.

One complex element of the emergence of *motorizados* as political actors is their relationship with the State. The contradictions, limitations and potential of this relationship are explored elsewhere, but some ideas must be laid out here<sup>18</sup>.

The instrumentalization of one sector of the *motorizados* movement by the state apparatus is indeed recurrent. It therefore presents complex challenges for the development of an autonomous political will within the framework of social movements. In the case of Venezuela, important ongoing research debates the probability that the large popular mobilization promoted by the Bolivarian Revolution might involve, paradoxically, significant disempowerment of the popular masses<sup>19</sup>. Nonetheless, in the case under consideration, the *motorizados* movement has shown important signs of a complex process of negotiation with the state, which can be better assessed in light of Ernesto Laclau's recent discussion on the political logic of "populist identification" and popular agency<sup>20</sup>. For instance, fractures within the movement and street protest tend to suggest a clear consciousness of the need to negotiate with the government without necessarily being absorbed by it. Whereas one particular group (ML) sees itself as an extension of the state apparatus, two other larger groups (*Frente Motorizado Franco Arquímedes* and *Organismo de Integración Motorizada Nacional*) see themselves as part of the revolutionary process, not having been subsumed by the state. Their

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importance of this sector of the population, and indicates a desire to assimilate and capitalize on their energy. An interesting example of a political ad using *motorizados* can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ji7MyTZGCDM>

<sup>18</sup> For an exploration of *motorizados* as an example of "non-traditional social movements" see my forthcoming article: "Mob Politics: Reconsidering Non-Traditional Social Movements in Contemporary Venezuela."

<sup>19</sup> See: Maria Pilar García- Guadilla, "Ciudadanía, inclusión y autonomía en las organizaciones sociales bolivarianas: Los comités de tierra urbana"; Daniel H. Levine and Catalina Romero, "Urban Citizen Movements and Disempowerment in Peru and Venezuela" and, for an opposing view, Steve Ellner, "The Venezuelan Labor Movement under Chávez: Autonomous Branch of Civil Society or Instrument of Political Control" and Sujatha Fernández *In the Spirit of Negro Primero: Urban Social Movements in Chavez's Venezuela*, forthcoming in Duke University Press, January 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Laclau, Ernesto. *The Populist Reason*. London and New York: Verso, 2005.

alliances function in strategic terms to channel particular demands, which cannot be reduced to simple clientelism, as might be the case of ML.

These variations are not subtle, as some of these biker organizations have at some time challenged the opposition and, when they saw fit, the government itself. They see this as what they call “*contraloría social*” (social monitoring); a way to keep in check a political process of which the government is only one small element: “*Si se pelan, los sacamos,*” one of them argued (“If they screw up, we’ll kick them out”).<sup>21</sup>

In 2004, the diverse groups that integrate the Fuerza Motorizada de Integración Comunitaria publicly addressed Vice President José Vicente Rangel to express their commitment to radical social change, as well as their rejection of any attempt to be considered a mere instrument of the Bolivarian Government<sup>22</sup>. What should be highlighted here is the express reference to a “bottom-up” model of governance that is constantly threatened by opportunist factions within the state. Such a critique is carried out within el *proceso* (as the Bolivarian project is frequently termed), even recurring to the constitutional framework of the revolution.

Los artículos 62,70,184,118,308 (...) contemplados en la Constitución Nacional reflejan la importancia de las organizaciones populares a medida que avanza el proceso revolucionario (...) La Fuerza Motorizada de Integración Comunitaria no está dispuesta a seguir siendo sub-utilizada por los diferentes factores políticos, personales, que no le han dado las mejores respuestas a las Comunidades Barrio Adentro (...) [Estos factores no] dejan que se conforme el verdadero PODER POPULAR.

More recently, a massive demonstration was held in front of the Ministry of Interior to demand action against crime. The participants in this street protest were members of the bikers’ movement allied with the Bolivarian government.

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<sup>21</sup> I draw here from personal interviews with *motorizados* as well as from their writings.

<sup>22</sup> The following year, the same organization challenged the methods used during the municipal elections to determine local representatives. See *Últimas Noticias*, January 14, 2005, 4.



If the risks of cooptation are not necessarily dissipated, the events suggest the need for a more complex reading of the actions and motivations of this community of workers. The idea of a thoughtless, manipulated collective, or an opportunistic and resentful marginal subject misses the depth of the larger political and social shift that has taken place in Venezuela since *El Caracazo*.

Some representatives of the Opposition have identified the need to respond to the demands of *motorizados*. Antonio Ledezma, mayor of Caracas, for example, recently spoke about an assistance plan for these

workers<sup>23</sup>. Such a development might be an implicit recognition of their leverage and effectiveness as agents of change. In spite of this, the social imaginary has proven to be more resilient: the apocalyptic reading persists among those who reject biker's participation in the political arena, or in the informal economy.



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<sup>23</sup> See "Ledezma firmó decreto para organizar a motorizados," *El Universal*, December 13, 2008.

In December 2003, a group of supporters of Hugo Chávez took over Plaza Altamira. This public space had become iconic for the Opposition. The events that followed might be a textbook case of the social construction of fear. Nevertheless, in two other separate occasions, acts of violence against the Opposition did take place, with tragic consequences.

In an article entitled “Satan is pleased,” published in the Spanish edition of *The Miami Herald*, *motorizados* are described in truly diabolic terms. The article refers to the destruction of “some Virgins” in a place where the faction opposing Chavez had gathered for months: “they came for the sacred images in a place of pairs (...) They came for the Virgins (...) while performing dances and laughing in a macabre manner, one of these devils decapitated the virgin, among the sickening joy of these delinquents”<sup>24</sup>.




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<sup>24</sup> Eleonora Bruzual, “Satanás se complace,” *Miami Herald*, 12/13/03. A longer quote gives a sense of the apocalyptic imaginary that overlaps with certain representations of “motorizados”: “No les pareció apetecible matar personas, venían a por las imágenes sagradas de un lugar para la oración, para la presencia viva de un país decente, para la paz, para la concordia (...) Altamira, emblema de la no violencia (...) Llegaron por las Vírgenes. A la Virgen de la Rosa Mística la pusieron en el suelo y, en un ritual espeluznante, entre bailes, risas macabras y violencia sin fin, uno de los diablos esgrimió un palo y de un solo golpe decapitó a la Virgen, ante el júbilo enfermo de uno de los delincuentes. La segunda estatua, de la Virgen Milagrosa, fue bajada de su pedestal, fue bailada en una especie de rito escalofriante, para terminar pintándole círculos rojos en la sien y en la espalda, siendo objeto de actos de aberraciones sexuales y morales inenarrables.”

## VII

*One Last Stop*

Toward the end of 1960s, Venezuelan poet Aquiles Nazoa wrote that *motorizados* are like little birds that seek cover from the rain under bridges. Towards the end of 1980s, they had become “mobs on wheels”; faceless riders of the apocalypse. These discourses cannot be separated from the political mobilization they have experienced since the mid 1980s, as well as their radical and often violent re-design of public spaces.

It is true that some bikers have engaged in violent and criminal acts, but this behavior is in no manner exclusive of one political faction or social subject, but rather something that has permeated many sectors of Venezuelan society. What cannot be seen, what seems inconceivable, is that some *motorizados* have demanded the creation of popular power; reflected upon the limits of traditional unions; and suggested the need for popular control over the current government (ideas that should, at the least, make the accusations of clientelism more complex).

In closing, I should also point out that *motorizados* are aware that they represent “the ghost” of the Other, and that such semblance is purposely articulated as a strategy of self-representation and struggle. One of them refers to the group as “African bees on the highway.” A polemical figure in this debate, who at one particular moment surrounded herself with the homeless—to create her political *personae*—, wrote: “Bikes do not run backwards. *Motorizados*, our iron horses, are part of history” (Murieta, 135).

## VIII

*Coda*

A path is always between two points, but the in-between has taken on all the consistency and enjoys both autonomy and a direction of its own. The life of the nomad is the intermezzo.  
—Deleuze and Guattari



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0XTF4Yaa9rw>

The counter narrative offered in this essay aims at displacing some apocalyptic visions of urban life in Caracas by suggesting a political articulation of a radical social subject. I am aware that in some of its manifestations the politics of affect that linger in the encounter with “*los caballos de hierro*” may not be as easy to comprehend. That may be where its radical nature resides. This video-coda stages some other complexities of the theme not addressed here, but it also reminds us that, between those two primordial points of life and death, this subject re-writes social practices and spaces with the freedom of a nomad. These pages scarcely give us insight into the “Mobs on Wheels,” as I call them in another essay. The clip was recorded by “*motorizados*”, as well as the Hip-Hop music, which celebrates the image of “*la lacra*” (the scum) while sampling on the famous “*El Ratón*” (by Cheo Feliciano.)

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