

CHAPTER 6



MORE STATE?

On Authority and the Conditions for Egalitarianism in Venezuela

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‘There is no government!’ The taxi driver whispered it, as if talking to himself. We were stuck in La Libertador, one of the main communication arteries in Ciudad Bolívar. This road has two lanes for each direction, and traffic is generally fluid. But not that day. Ahead of us, a funeral rally blocked the way, occupying both lanes. No one used the horn to complain – no one dared. A *malandro* was being buried,¹ one close to the powerful chief-in-command at Vista Alegre, the local jail. The coffin, surrounded by family and friends, was placed on top of an uncovered truck, and cars paraded slowly at its flanks and rear, marking the occasion with solemnity. While the taxi driver did not elevate the tone of his voice, you could tell something boiled inside him. ‘When someone honest dies, no one gives a damn, and look at this!’ I was upset too. I had lived long enough in Ciudad Bolívar not to be surprised by the display we came across that afternoon, but the sensation that we were obliged to pay compulsory tribute to the *malandro* was strong. I joined the driver in lamenting the state of affairs, but of course it did not make a difference. It took us ages to get to my place, which was right at the other side of the cemetery.

That episode took place in mid 2011, but in some respects it is far from exceptional: the expression ‘there is no government!’ is quite common in Venezuela as a form of conclusive statement. For instance, let me recall the case of another taxi ride I had taken also in Ciudad Bolívar, just a few months before the one described above. I picked that taxi close to 6PM at Paseo Orinoco, a commercial area in the city. That time of the day, when the sun

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expires, buses, vans and the so-called *perreras* were all packed,² with kids and young men literally hanging out from them. The scene is typical, conditioned by last-chance urges. As soon as it gets dark, drivers take their vehicles (which are theirs, not ‘public’) home. No ‘public’ transport will be found until the next day. The evening I took that taxi was particularly busy. It was early December, and many people were already doing Christmas shopping. I had been lucky getting that lift, and once in the taxi I relaxed chatting away with the driver. When the conversation came to ‘there is no government!’ we had been talking about transport for a while. Initially, it was light talk spurred by the sights of packed buses and *perreras*. But what triggered the driver’s exclamation was talk about Christmas plans and intercity transport. I planned on travelling to the town of my in-laws in Sucre in a few days, and the taxi driver had relatives travelling to Valencia (Carabobo). That time of the year, bus lines and *por puesto* cars increase fares by a quarter or more over the regular price.³ They call it *aguinaldo*, as the (voluntary) Christmas gift, but it is a compulsory fee: either you pay it or you don’t get into the vehicle. ‘There is no government!’ was the taxi driver’s summary evaluation of the situation, projecting a form of indignant sympathy for those who, like his relatives or myself, had to rely on intercity transport on those days around Christmas.

The expression is no exclusive verbal patrimony of those who drive taxis. Nor is it a localism from Ciudad Bolívar. ‘There is no government!’ is uttered in any region and from people positioned quite differently in social terms. A third example registered in the country’s capital in mid 2015 further illustrates the point. It came from Toni, a man in his sixties who lives in the working class neighbourhood of Lomas de Urdaneta (Catia). These days he makes do with a pension and the stipend he gets as a member of a band of musicians hired through the Central Bank for cultural activities. Toni was hosting Marco, an old friend from Puerto Ordaz, and me for a few days. When we arrived in Caracas, Toni came to meet us at the metro station near his place, and after cheerful greetings and some shopping we headed north towards the stop where *busetas* (small urban buses) take passengers to go up Las Lomas. *Bachaqueros* were scattered along the way,⁴ selling products that by then were quite scarce – that is, scarce at regulated prices, for if you were willing to pay fivefold that price or more, you could get them through different channels. Marco asked Toni about the price *bachaqueros* sold the coffee there, to compare it with the prices in Puerto Ordaz. The price was very much the same, but the question led Toni to tell us about a recent episode in which police had removed a group of *bachaqueros* from the area we had just walked past, only for the *bachaqueros* to come back the next day with the same range of products. ‘There is no government, *chico!*’ Marco remarked. His quarrel was not with street vending or specifically with the *bachaqueros* we saw on the street. He was giving out about the *process* that the notion of

‘bachaquero’ encapsulates. For Marco, as for many others, the street vendor appeared as a weak link in a long chain of smuggling that translates in the (re)selling of products often produced in state-owned companies and sold or distributed with state sponsorship.

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In this chapter I will engage with debates on egalitarianism by discussing what the protagonists of these episodes refer to when they speak of (a missing) ‘government’. Those episodes are diverse in their constitutive elements, but they all comparably make an appeal to a public authority and reflect intersubjective conceptions of injustice. The sense of injustice runs parallel to the acknowledgement that factual powers impinge on one’s basic wellbeing. Those factual powers take different shapes, as we have seen: in (latent) coercive capacities, for instance, as elicited in the observance of respect towards participants in the funeral of the *malandro*; but they can also, as our last episode illustrated, manifest themselves in market mechanisms that end up excluding some people from access to basic goods or services (such as foods or transport), or making that access undignified. The experiential acknowledgment of the existence of those powers, in tandem with the sense of injustice they triggered, is what made people appeal to ‘government’.

‘Government’ here operates as a signifier in which people condense notions of justice and the aspiration that a particular form of authority can guarantee the conditions for it – at the expense of other actually existing forms. Engaging classical debates of Enlightenment political theorists, I contend that such authority is ‘the state’ and will argue that understanding people’s aspiration to recover or install it sheds light on political positioning and mobilization in a country like Venezuela. In relation to the episodes I described above, I will discuss the extent to which the emergence and shaping of the so-called Bolivarian state can be considered to be a response to people’s demands for ‘state’, tout court, particularly in the areas of security and socio-economic enfranchisement.

To ground these arguments, I will start by elaborating on the concepts of authority and the state, aiming to clarify which takes on those concepts are misguided when trying to formulate theoretically the aspirations of people who call for ‘government’ along the lines that the protagonists of the episodes I discussed do.

Authority, Authoritarianism and the State

The episodes I recall above have at their core an appeal to a form of authority that is reclaimed in the mediation of social relations. It is therefore a public

authority, and those who were calling for it expected that it would impose itself upon other forms of authority that effectively mediate social relations – but in a way considered unjust. Those appeals to a (strong) public authority should not be understood as calls for authoritarian government. This question begs additional commentary, given the loaded connotations that calls for authority have in political theory in general and in contemporary Venezuela in particular – where opinions about the alleged benefits of an authoritarian corrective to the current political scenario are publicly circulated by some people.

Authoritarianism has been central to political debates in Venezuela for over a century, at the very least. When the concept was not brought to the forefront, it remained as a shadow contender with which theorists wrestled when characterizing the configuration of Venezuelan society and its politics. Even when from the 1970s onwards analysts penned the theory of exceptionalism that singled out Venezuela as a unique model of democratic culture and institutionality in the continent (Ellner and Tinker-Salas 2005), the question of authoritarianism remained as an absent presence – as it were, it was the opaque background against which the new democratic institutions shined with singular, and to some extent unexpected, splendour. Venezuela was free of the military dictatorships that from the 1960s to the 1980s lacerated the peoples of many countries in the continent, and this was indeed remarkable because of the minimal signs for optimism that the first half of the century had offered.

For twenty-eight years (1908–1935), Juan Vicente Gómez had imprinted Venezuela's oil-bound transition into modernization and developmentalism with an authoritarian bent (Tinker-Salas 2009). The only (and fleeting) interlude that during the first half of the century promised to open up national politics to democratic institutionality (the so-called 'trienio democrático' of 1945–1948) was cut abruptly by a coup that installed another military figure, Delgado Chalbaud, as head of government. Assassinated in 1950, his replacement was temporarily covered by Germán Suárez Flamerich, while a commanding *Junta Militar* paved the way for a return to an openly authoritarian regime: the (not so distant) dictatorship of Pérez Jiménez (1952–1958). Notably, Pérez Jiménez justified his disdain for pluralism and party politics by his belief in the benefits that concentration of power, in tandem with his personal efforts and guidance, would have for the progress of the country. From then on, the country entered a period of continuing, if tightly demarcated, democratic competition,⁵ but the shadows cast by the authoritarian models of the past remained too close to be ignored.

Figures such as Pérez Jiménez, and before him Gómez, had incarnated the idea that dictatorship was the only political system capable of making Venezuela flourish and of bringing forth its potential for progress. Such an idea

had been brought to its maximum organic expression by prominent intellectual Vallenilla Lanz (1870–1936), who developed it in the form of a scientific thesis in his influential ‘Cesarismo democrático’ (1991 [1919]). Vallenilla Lanz became an active supporter of Gómez’s regime on the grounds that the latter had come to meet the historical necessities of the Venezuelan society. In his view, a strong visionary leader who could impose its force upon other competing *caudillos* was necessary to guarantee a degree of security and cohesion in a country in which instability and fragmentation were presented as historically determined conditions, exacerbated by the independence wars and subsequent factional warfare during the early decades of the Republic. Vallenilla Lanz presented his thesis as the outcome of an ideologically neutral positivist approach that placed normative political discussion and abstracted principles of government in a secondary plane. Venezuela, as any other country, was seen as dependent on an ‘organic constitution’ that did not necessarily match the ‘paper constitutions’ sanctioned in accord with the principles of liberalism or any other political ideology. From that perspective, abstracted principles of democracy and division of powers and the like were impotent, and misguided, for the transformation of society.

Nonetheless, Vallenilla Lanz did not advocate ahistorical support for authoritarian forms of government. He saw in the latter a scientifically motivated response to specific social conditions: it was the positive organic constitution of the country that made *caudillos* a ‘social necessity’. In Vallenilla Lanz’s view, such a conclusion was to be actively supported by those who aspired to transform the political conditions of the country and facilitate their betterment. With adequate political intervention, Venezuela would evolve towards different organic forms that in turn would require new, more modern political institutions.

The proposals made by Vallenilla Lanz, and the premises that sustained them, had a lasting impact on Venezuelan political debates. They generated repulsion among progressive and liberal sectors of the Venezuelan society⁶ but also underpinned the views of some elites and the middle classes that were keen to stop any sign of potential alteration of the status quo – open democratic competition appeared as too much of a risk in the face of what they interpreted as the immature character of the masses. At present, the ideas that ‘Cesarismo Democrático’ articulated in scholarly form can still be identified in a variety of publicly expressed manifestations, more or less uprooted from its original theoretical terrain.

Let us recall that the governments of Hugo Chávez (1999–2013) mechanically evoked among its liberal critics the image of the authoritarian *caudillo*, regardless of the democratic source of his legitimacy. His military background, polarizing style and charismatic profile resuscitated among some analysts theories about the immature character of the Venezuelan democ-

racy and its people – specifically the people who had brought Chávez to the presidency with their votes and those who subsequently re-elected him three times as president. Today, and exacerbated by the profound socio-economic crisis that strikes the country, fatalist evaluations of the ‘national character’ spring up in everyday conversations, encapsulated in statements along the lines of ‘nothing will ever change in Venezuela’. This type of evaluation is, of course, contested: many people situate in structural economic factors, and primarily in the political realm (domestic and international), the source of problems to be overcome, and they give names to those they consider responsible for the current state of affairs (be they members of the Executive, opposition leaders or foreign governments interfering in national politics). Yet for fatalists and conservative ‘cesaristas’ alike, it is the unchanged organic substance of national society that is the root of the problem, and hard-line ‘cesarista’ resolutions continue to appeal to them. Sometimes those inclinations are overtly expressed in amazingly normalized calls for a coup or an external military intervention against Maduro’s government. These are made by a variety of people, ranging from right-wing politicians declaring to international media to politically disaffected youngsters sharing through twitter such opinions in a rather casual form (calls for a coup come amidst comments on the latest videos of favourite YouTubers, expressions of romantic expectation and fun memes). In the recent past – that is, in January 2019 – when Juan Guaidó (then quite an anonymous political figure) appointed himself as ‘interim’ president of Venezuela, declarations calling for foreign military intervention seem to have become even more common and normalized among radical sectors of the opposition bloc.

While those commentaries are generally made in the name of democracy and freedom, they hardly disguise conceptualizations of those terms under a ‘law and order’ frame whose realization would require *mano dura* (iron fist) governmental approaches,⁷ and not only to address crime (Antillano and Ávila 2017): at present, that frame also rests on the idea that *mano dura* measures would be needed to control those sectors of the popular classes that up to this day, despite the aggravation of the economic crisis that goes in tandem with the draconian sanctions that the US and a handful of governments have imposed on the country’s financial structures, remain mobilized in support of Bolivarian governments. Comments along the lines of ‘we ought to terminate chavistas’ or ‘I wish all chavistas were dead’, which can frequently be read in social media, are worryingly telling of predispositions in that respect.

It is, however, important to clearly separate that type of ‘cesarista’ proposition from the appeals to ‘government’ made by the protagonists of the episodes portrayed at the outset of this chapter. The contextualized signification of those appeals to government reveals what one could characterize

as Rousseauian inclinations among those who made them. The ‘government’ was missed in the face of the imposition of a *malandro* order, and the ‘government’ that was found absent from the process that tips out with the street sale of products such as coffee or milk at an exorbitant price for poor citizens, is an authority people conceive as something located above them but in a way that could (and in their view should) protect them from abusive conditions. In other words, people were reclaiming the effective presence of a public authority that is conceived as superior to and more legitimate than the rest and that was also expected to have the capacity to impose itself upon others in order to prevent situations of social injustice. Such public authority is not conceived as an erosion of individual autonomies or rights but on the contrary as the guarantor of conditions for them.

Those claims thus echo what Rousseau classically described in *The Social Contract* (1762) as the public power that legitimately results from civic association. Rousseau, as concerned with the problem of political subjugation and authoritarian ruling as he was with consolidating a notion of republican liberties, put his efforts into arguing why freedom remains guaranteed, and in fact is made possible, by the voluntary concessions that people make for the creation of a political community cemented upon a general will and with organs that express such will through norms. The existence of that general will makes it possible that people remain free when *giving themselves* to the political community, and when thereby becoming subjected to the mediations of a public authority. Legitimate norms of that authority are conceived as the normative emanation of the general will, and thus, as the riddle-like expression had it: people will be obeying themselves when obeying the law.

In the dedicatory of his famous *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality Among Men* (1923 [1755]), Rousseau figuratively equated the submission to legitimate republican authority and its law to the weight produced by a ‘smooth and beneficial’ yoke. In his view, such yoke could be carried with (citizen) pride, since it was suited for those who are not willing to bear any other yoke.

Rousseau’s propositions, as we know, were developed into a form of universal abstraction consonant with the formation of an idealized political subject of Enlightened modernity, and they are debatable and revisable in many respects – not least for the way in which they contributed to facilitating the subordination of women in the political realm of modernity (Cobo 1995). Yet it is nevertheless worth reflecting on why echoes of such propositions can be found in the evaluations that people like the protagonists of my episodes make about the contemporary polity and the character and legitimacy of public authorities. These evaluations are not produced against speculative reconstructions of the human condition and the changes it may have experienced in a transition from a state of nature to a civil state; on the

contrary, they emerge as political readings of personal experience against situated historical scenarios. And what currently seems to emerge in these scenarios (and with distinctive crudity in regions like Latin America) in the absence of the 'yoke of the state' is not a return to an idyllic state of nature or a transition into any of those realms of freedom that, under different premises and with more or less appreciation of egalitarian ideals, utopians of all ideological leanings envisaged (from liberals to anarchists to communists).

So What Is There When There Is No State, and Why Should People Care?

The contention that the functioning of political institutions and systems ought to be studied beyond their formal and normative aspects has been the absorbing orientation of much political anthropology, and certainly so during the period in which the modern state develops in a frame demarcated by the normative horizons of liberal democracy and the contextual forces of global capitalism. A methodological focus on institutions and bureaucracies has been complemented, when not displaced, by studies with a poststructuralist perspective in which the state is also seen as produced through practices, imagination and affects, and through what, in very general terms, one may denominate culturally conditioned predispositions. This focus runs the risk of overlooking the analysis of the material processes that structure practices and even influence the shaping of affects and imaginations, but in turn enables the emergence of new insights into the study of state formations. One is thus invited to consider discursive elements in the formation of expectations about the state; for instance, along the lines of what Akhil Gupta proposed in his work on the Indian state (1995). The state can be approached as an imagined entity, shaped in public culture. Against this general background, we can resume the discussion of my opening ethnographic vignettes and of an expression such as 'there is no government!', aiming to identify discursive constructions of what the state is and can be and also shedding light on Venezuelan politics and of different positions within them.

The modern state form, detached from its Enlightened principles and unevenly developed with the expansion of capitalism, has become central to the reproduction of capital, the reinforcement of core and peripheries in the world system and the consolidation of hierarchical class-based orders inside nations. It is in that sense not surprising that antistatism has become the driving force of a variety of political groups, and also that at discursive levels 'state' has become a shortcut signifier to name the source of (any) social inequality. But it is also important not to overlook that much of the political mobilization that has emerged over the past three decades in Latin America (and other parts of the world) can be precisely read as a call to recover

the state, both as the apparatus that can guarantee the materialization of socio-economic rights and as that public authority that can guarantee the materialization of the common will. For these mobilized Latin Americans citizens (as for many others elsewhere), the realization is that, in the absence of the state, what appears in a world of globalized and volatile capitalism is not a realm of freedom and egalitarianism, but one shaped by the power of groups that, in service of particularistic ends, tend to augment inequalities and often directly take on some of the capacities and monopolies that political theory attributed to the state.

To reflect on these processes of reorganization of power and the mushrooming of non-state orders, looking at what happens in Venezuelan jails becomes, somewhat paradoxically, illuminating. Andrés Antillano (2017) has described what he denominates carceral self-rule: groups of organized prisoners replace the role of bureaucratic organization within prisons, in the process claiming for themselves that monopoly of legitimate violence that characterized the power of the state in the famous Webberian theorization. Prisoners' self-rule in a space originally conceived to facilitate the exercise of strict surveillance by state agents is just a localized, but telling, expression of broader social processes in which illegal organizations aim to install sovereign control over demarcated territories, in many respects openly replicating forms of representation of state public authority and ceremony. The case of the funeral I described at the beginning contains some of its ingredients. Indeed, one could read that event as a state funeral, small scale: attendants occupied public space as only public authorities do. Yet the degree to which exercises of power like this represent a political will that, in essence, seeks to replace the (nation-)state is best illustrated by episodes in which protagonists resort to national symbols to project meaning on their actions. Let me recall one such episode I learnt about in Ciudad Bolívar's jail, Vista Alegre.

I visited Vista Alegre jail several times during late 2006 and early 2007. A friend I have known since 2004, and who used to work for a small tourist operator in the frontier town of Santa Elena, had been indirectly embroiled in a drug smuggling case and ended up in Vista Alegre while awaiting trial.⁸ During one of my visits, I was told about a funeral that had recently taken place there. Like the one in the vignette I described earlier, it was the funeral of a *malandro* linked to the *pran* (the president-like figure of the state-like entity that is reproduced there). On that occasion, the funeral rally, on its way to the cemetery, made a stop in the adjacencies of the jail, close to the main entrance area. The *pran* had organized a special ceremony for his former high-ranking aid. The inmates were congregated by the *pran* and his aids on one of the jail's roofed areas from where they could see the funeral attendants and, once in formation, were asked to intonate the national an-

them in honour of the deceased. Before the rally departed, gun salutes were fired by members of the *pran's* guard.

Vista Alegre is a typical Venezuelan jail in key respects. Inside its walls there is literally no presence of state agents – they have been expelled and are not given access unless it is specifically granted by the inmates governing body, and only under certain conditions. Self-rule is thus absolute, and a proto-state form grows in that scenario. Yet such replication of a state order and the (adapted to circumstances) adoption of its symbols and ritual forms does not only take place inside the prison, where the three elements that international law uses to define the potential for sovereign statehood are present in a manageable scale: there is a (limited and well demarcated) territory, a population and a government. It also occurs on a larger scale and often in synergies with the authorities that control rule inside prisons.

The groups that end up exercising carceral government often precede their carceral existence (Antillano 2017: 26), and other times they start an inverse sequence that connects them with the ‘outside’: that is, groups that are formed through in-prison governance experiences end up constituting the core of larger organized groups outside it. In either case, the capacities of government that those in charge of carceral self-rule exercise often go beyond the walls of prisons in a way that blurs the inside-outside boundary of these spaces.⁹ This is of course further complicated by the fact that, as John Gledhill (2015) has shown for the cases of Mexico and Brazil, the private interests of organized crime can infiltrate the state apparatus to a large extent, and also by the fact that actually existing states can facilitate the conditions for the expansion of organized crime. At any rate, what appears as a result is a social landscape of competing (if partially overlapping) sovereign orders.

Gledhill has conceptualized a model of parastate governance in Barrio da Paz, a poor neighbourhood of Bahia (Brazil), as an ‘order of crime’ (2015: 67–76). The concept is stimulating in capturing the way a local gang imposes its own norms of security under the zones it controls while in parallel replacing the (precarious) ‘order of the state’ that preceded it. In Barrio da Paz, the latter order had generated widespread animosity among residents because of the behaviour of agents in the police post that offered ‘state security’ to the community – and also because the coercive branches of the state are the only ones that gain prominence there, despite residents’ demands for enhanced access to social services and citizenship rights in general. Police acts of racism and arbitrariness were recurrent and denounced by residents, something that is even better understood in relation to broader contextual factors: the community’s lands are a tempting ground for city developers and their political allies, and the potential (city government-backed) eviction of residents has been a continuing threat.

The police post removed, a new order was imposed by a drug lord-led group that with its one 'law of crime' administered justice against petty delinquents and mediated in neighbourhood disputes while facilitating a smooth continuation for the business of drug-trafficking in the community. Many of the residents affected by this new order expressed their conformity with it and the opinion that it provided more safety than the order of the state under the (abusive) supervision of police forces. While not a view shared by everyone in the community, such an experience of ambivalence towards, or open preference for, an 'order of crime' has been identified in neighbourhoods of Venezuela that have been targeted by special police operatives in the fight against crime.¹⁰ Given the indiscriminate and often uncontrolled implementation of operations in poor neighbourhoods that at times murder citizens not involved in criminal activity while failing to capture those who are, some residents in these areas fear and distrust the police more than the gangs that develop among them.¹¹

The 'orders of crime', however, and regardless of the legitimacy they might generate in the view of those subjected to them, tend to be precarious, as much or more imperfect or flawed than 'orders of the state'. Gledhill noted that even those who were positive about the benefits that the order of crime had initially brought to the community of Barrio da Paz in terms of safety started to question that assumption as soon as conflict re-emerged over control of drug-traffic in the area (2015: 71–72). This phenomenon seems to be recurrent: 'orders of crime' are generally constituted upon foundational violence, once a particular faction forcefully imposes itself upon rival ones, and it is generally never too long before another faction tries to contest the existing order. Returning to my previous example, cyclical changes in headship of carceral self-rule illustrate it. The ruling order of Ciudad Bolívar's jail when I visited it had resulted from the imposition of a single *pran* who imposed himself in an open war. It was widely seen by inmates of the time as an improvement from the pre-existing situation, when inside the jail operated little chieftaincies with various leaders in continuing tension. But factions contested power with some regularity, in rebellions that always caused casualties and punishments and that, expectedly, recurred until a replacement of the governing headship arrived. These replacements sometimes occur through a constrained attack on a *pran* and perhaps some of his close aids, but other times involve large-scale violent confrontations between rival groups of inmates.

One possible avenue to explain this precariousness of orders is that they most often originate to facilitate the realization of particularistic interests even when they *also* articulate aspects of the general will. Forms of redistribution and service provision are often undertaken in these orders too, though they tend to be limited in scope and selective in terms of the selec-

tion of beneficiaries, rather than universal: people with whom the leaders of these orders have more personal or political connection receive more benefits than the rest (e.g. Penglase 2009). Of course, the existence of those particularistic interests cannot be explained through tropes about the moral character of the subjects who articulate them ('criminals' are in such a light always treated as 'naturally' deviant subjects). In many cases, those particularistic interests are the outcome of the conditions under which those who develop these orders operate in their search for wealth and status (mainstream driving goals in our capitalist societies). With no access to productive sources or property that enables them to accumulate capital and/or obtain rent, business models and rent-seeking among people from structurally poor social sectors rapidly lead to particular niches of illegal activity – what one could call 'blue-collar' illegal activities, to distinguish them from the type of illegal activity that some economic and political elites cultivate (often lumped under the category of 'corruption'), and which could be adjectivized as 'white-collar'. So such conditions of structural exclusion are to be taken into account in analysing the emergence of these orders and the legitimacies they may generate, particularly when fluid connections and interdependence are identified between crime and state orders and the way in which they overlap in the promotion of particularistic interests. Yet, still, a lingering question remains unanswered: why in this scenario of consolidating orders of crime and the erosion of the legitimacy of the actually existing orders of the state do people keep on expressing aspirations to recover the latter (as an order in which a public authority effectively mediates social relations)? The ethnographic vignettes that opened this chapter exemplify the resilience of that aspiration among some Venezuelans, and such examples gain additional weight when read in conjunction with larger expressions of the 'politics of state recovery' that have received mass support in Venezuela and other parts of Latin America. Indeed, the emergence of the so-called Pink Tide can be read against a widespread citizen demand for state recovery, as is well known. And such recovery, in addition to its focus on socio-economic enfranchisement, has also found expression in the area of security policy to a considerable extent in response to citizen demands.

State Recovery and Security

When it comes to discussing security, the aspiration that a state authority is recovered as the public authority that prevails in the mediation of a variety of social relations is of course not a naïve belief in the 'sweet and beneficial' yoke of a state apparatus that, in many cases, has rather become rough and pernicious – particularly for populations that are defined as a threat to se-

curity under the paradigm of neoliberal capitalism, with ensuing insecurity co-produced by state agents and criminal organizations in more or less voluntary synergies (Gledhill 2015).

Yet in countries like Venezuela, the perception that behind growing insecurity there are groups that contest the state (as the authority that they would like to see mediating social relations) has become a source of potential legitimacy for *mano dura* approaches to combat crime across class lines – that is, not only as an elite-fostered political strategy. This is far from precluding increasing distrust in police forces, often as distrusted or feared as *malandros* by those who consider themselves to be good citizens. As a matter of fact, evidence of connections between members of police forces and criminal gangs is strong (ranging from the provision of weapons that the former guarantee to the latter or direct participation in extortion of different kinds). This question has been publicly presented by experts in security studies, revealed by regular news of arrests of police officers involved in illegal activities and also incorporated into general public knowledge. Stories about exposure to petty acts of police corruption are common in conversations at family or friends reunions, often shared in tones that combine humour and indignation. ‘Whenever I’m stopped by a police officer, the first thing I say is “how much do you want?”’ This statement, a contribution by an acquaintance I made at a small restaurant in Ciudad Bolívar’s fish market, can be used to illustrate that public lore.

Popular and government concerns with increasing erosion of trust in police forces were behind an ambitious attempt at reforming the police forces that was initiated in 2006. A National Commission for Police Reform (CONAREPOL by its Spanish acronym) was created that year, linked to the Ministry of Home Affairs and Justice (El Achkar 2010). Evaluations of its limited results have been offered by a variety of specialists and would divert us away from our current discussion; here I want to highlight how this project fits with the politics of state recovery. That Commission was precisely launched in a period in which the idea of ‘the state’ was being strongly recovered in the country, with ‘Bolivarian socialism’ already situated by Chávez’s government as a driving goal, and with the widening of redistributive policies on full display in part thanks to a favourable international economic context for oil exports. This period marked a peak in electoral results for *chavismo*: in December 2006, Chávez would capture nearly two thirds (62.84%) of the national vote.

I of course do not suggest that this convergence at a time of a peak in electoral results and a peak in the development of government-led policies of state recovery results from a direct relation of causality, but I do contend that it is worth consideration when trying to shed light on political process and electoral behaviour. The Venezuelan process of reform replicated to a

large extent global agendas of police reform at the time, and one of the reasons why this occurred is because police forces nowadays have gained a type of symbolic value (Antillano 2016): particularly in scenarios in which there is an increasing demand of security from all social classes, politicians and elites become interested in ‘police intervention’ as a form of increasing and managing political capital. I suggest that this ‘symbolic value’ operates also in other types of state intervention in security policy; it is generally easy to frame it discursively as responsive to the general will.

In the face of this reality and the fact that governments of different ideological leanings develop such policies, it is not simple to identify the political orientation of those who support a recovery of the state in the area of security provision. Only when complemented with analyses of the orientation of policies of state recovery in other areas, and particularly in terms of socio-economic enfranchisement, can one attempt to discern the overall political directionality of those politics of state recovery. So let me try to do so for the case of Venezuela, and more broadly against the background established by the so-called Pink Tide in Latin America.

State Recovery and Socio-economic Enfranchisement

The characterizations of the leftist governments that came to be identified under the ‘Pink Tide’ label are quite diverse and often diverging (Ellner 2019), but among them there is generally a common acknowledgement: they brought ‘the state back’ into the shaping of Latin American societies after the peak of the neoliberal revolution had destabilized the social contracts in most of them. In the late 1980s and 1990s, peripheral states such as the Latin American ones lost sovereignty at fast pace, privatization of public assets accelerated and, in the countries in which a welfare state had started to take shape, provision of social services fell dramatically as a result of the austerity policies that came to be imposed by supranational donors in exchange for financial support. All or most of these manifestations of neoliberal governance were affected by a reversing political impulse when the governments of the Pink Tide, and particularly those in the orbit of the so-called socialisms of the twenty-first century, came to power.

An important question tends to be overlooked in the evaluations of this process, particularly now that there seems to be a widespread consensus around the idea that the Pink Tide is over or in irreversible decline. The governments in the orbit of this Tide succeeded in giving form to a type of collective subject that, even when removed from power, remains as a realistic alternative for progressive post-neoliberal governance in the continent.¹² These subjects, constituted as national-popular blocs, have fluctuated in size

since their emergence, but at any rate they have electorally sustained governments even in periods of strong crisis, such as in Venezuela, and in other cases, when defeated in the ballot box, they have nevertheless showed up as a realistic contender for government. Recall that the 2015 victory of Macri in Argentina, which was rapidly used as evidence of the decline of the Pink Tide, was narrow, and also that other cases generally presented as evidence for that decline have all been tight victories of rightist forces: Evo Morales' bloc was defeated in the Bolivian referendum for constitutional reform in February 2016 by a very thin margin, for instance. Furthermore, in yet other cases used to certify the alleged historical defeat of the Pink Tide, such as Brazil, rightist forces continue to do their best to sidestep an open electoral confrontation with leftist rivals – not only did they remove Dilma Rousseff in a parliamentary coup, but they also manoeuvred to avoid that Lula could become a presidential candidate again, eventually placing him in jail through a judicial process plagued by irregularities.

The consolidation of these blocs deserves more than superficial attention, particularly in a global conjuncture in which there is evidence of a revolt against neoliberal governance in many different countries. Because, with the exception of Latin America, where the Pink Tide succeeded in cementing this collective subject I refer to, this is a revolt in which emerging post-neoliberal collective subjects are generally taking shape under the leadership of proto-fascist parties or of anarchic extreme right-wingers (current examples in Europe are myriad, and the one in the USA is indicative of the range of forms that discontent with neoliberal business-as-usual can produce in the absence of organized progressive options).

There are at least two central questions to be considered in the consolidation of these blocs. Firstly, as collective subjects they were primarily amalgamated by demands for socio-economic enfranchisement that involved 'state recovery'. Second, Pink Tide governments, which to differential degrees facilitated that enfranchisement, were actively supported by mass state-supporting movements – that is, the orientation of government policy was thus generative of supportive social mobilization. I have elsewhere examined and characterized the constitution of such state-supporting movements in Venezuela (Angosto-Ferrández 2015), remarking that their collective action has been channelled through the electoral arena (a space generally neglected by social movement analysts) but also through a variety of other institutional and extra-institutional channels. Those movements have been fundamentally oriented towards supporting a state structure (expression of a public authority) that could effectively guarantee socio-economic and political enfranchisement in relation to the forces that have historically ignored it or broken it up, and thus actively supported governments that facilitated that enfranchisement. They have done so under a Rousseauian frame, as it

were, considering that in the realm of economic transactions the lack of state presence can lead to exclusion and injustice (the vignette I presented from the ‘there is no government, *chico!*’ lament in Catia can be read against that background).

The functioning of those state-supporting movements undermines widespread preconceptions about social movement activity, and particularly conceptions of the ‘state’ and ‘society’ as ontologically separated entities. Not only do the members of these state-supporting social movements operate on both sides of that alleged ontological divide, but their activity reveals them as drivers of a state-supporting collective action that destabilizes the often taken for granted antagonism between social movements and the state.

I suggest that when reading the support for strong intervention against perceived ‘orders of crime’ in conjunction with this other type of state-supporting mobilization, we find that the overarching spirit of such intervention is primarily shaped by concerns with justice and general will, and not with the (class-biased) punishment of the poorer sectors of society in which the implementation of those interventions have often been transformed.

Conclusion

I opened this chapter with vignettes in which a variety of people lamented that there is no government (‘state’), and I closed it recalling that much of the political mobilization that has taken place in Venezuela and other parts of Latin America over the past few decades can be read as state-supporting mobilization. In between, I discussed the social landscapes that, in this period of globalized and volatile capitalism, emerge in the absence of the state (as a public authority that can effectively mediate social relations). It is my suggestion that against this background we can learn about how people, today, pursue the constructions of conditions for egalitarianism. For a variety of reasons that include the way in which neoliberal hegemony led to a loading of key political concepts with particular (neoliberally oriented) connotations, ‘the state’ has ended up in the margins of theoretical discussions of egalitarianism – or at the front, but as the principal enemy to defeat. This is a pity, and perhaps not inconsequential. Such displacement may be conditioned by the difficulties of translating conceptually people’s evaluations of their own social environments and also by associations of ‘the state’ with its corporate and authoritarian forms, but in any case it sets rigid boundaries to our capacities to think about contemporary politics and their potential developments. Given the worrying symptoms that contemporary politics project in many parts of the world, with authoritarianism and proto-fascism re-emerging in some countries as electorally backed responses to capitalist

crisis, setting such boundaries to the analysis of political attitudes and proposals may be costly. So it might not be a bad idea to listen to people who ask for ‘more state’ in search for justice and egalitarian social conditions, as a first step towards an understanding what that means and how it can be realized.

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NOTES

1. ‘Malandro’ is a term used in Venezuela to refer generically to people involved in criminal or outlawed activities.
2. ‘Perreras’ literally translates as ‘dog transporters’. It is used to name a type of van that has been adapted by its owner to carry passengers for a fee. The name is telling of the degradation that many users of ‘public transport’ experience on a daily basis.
3. ‘Por puesto’ is the name given to cars that take passengers covering a given route (whether inside a city or between cities). They charge each passenger the same fee.
4. The term ‘bachaquero’ (a colloquial derivation from ‘bachaco’, the name given to a type of ant) is used to refer to street vendors dealing with generally black-marketted products.
5. The so-called Fourth Republic that was born out of the agreement of Punto Fijo (1958) established from the outset ideological limits to political participation. The Communist Party was excluded from the emerging arena of electoral competition, and over the years the regime effectively turned into a bi-partisan regime imprinted by repression of minority sectors of leftist dissidence.
6. Illustratively, in the late 1920s and from exile, the leader of Acción Democrática and future president of Venezuela, Rómulo Betancourt, described Vallenilla Lanz as a ‘Tropical Machiavelli cast in toilet paper’ (Harwich Vallenilla 1991).
7. Though focused on another case (specifically, El Salvador), the work of Sonja Wolf (2017) describes compellingly how this type of approach against gang crime, which on the one hand generally receives social support, is used by the country’s elites to consolidate political power.
8. Santa Elena, located right by the border with Brazil, is the capital of Gran Sabana municipal unit, in the south of Bolívar state. Behind the case of my friend were two Spanish fake tourists who had hired a tourist service with the agency my friend worked for. Those tourists were given permission to leave their luggage in the agency office while they were (allegedly) going on another tour on Pacaraima, right at the other side of the national border. They said that once they finished that other tour they would arrange collection of the luggage, and so they did a few days later. A taxi driver came to pick up the luggage, and when he was crossing the international

border the luggage was inspected by Venezuelan custom agents. Eight kilograms of cocaine were found there, and both taxi driver and my friend from the tourist agency (a man in his late fifties, married and with two teenage kids) were considered potentially complicit by one attorney and became formally charged.

9. In Ciudad Bolívar, it was common knowledge that a group that specialized in robbery of cars was commanded from inside the jail of Vista Alegre, just to provide an example relevant to my discussion.
10. Gledhill notes that often older people consider that the only possible legitimate authority is that of the police and the judiciary system.
11. See comments by Andrés Antillano in this regard (Bujanda 2015).
12. In this section, I draw from a piece previously published at the *Progress in Political Economy* (PPE) blog: ‘The Hidden Victory of *Chavismo* – and Another Twist on the Pink Tide’, 9 August 2017.

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