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Urban Social Movements in Venezuela

1. In the past several decades, we have seen the emergence of what has come to be known as the “Pink Tide:” an upsurge of prominent social movements across Latin American hemisphere that have led to substantial political change, including the elections of left and center-left governments in Brazil, Venezuela, Bolivia, Uruguay and Ecuador, among others. Latin Americans are challenging neoliberal policies, elitist rule, and traditional party politics, and much of the radical action that is sweeping through the region comes from below, from the popular classes and their increasing ability to organize and carve out spaces in which to form coalitions, engage with political leaders and define resistant positions. I want to emphasize that this has happened through the increasing power of social movements; organized yet informal social entities that are engaged in a struggle that is oriented towards a goal. What I hope to demonstrate today, and I hope will be relevant to you in your classes, whatever field you may be representing, is that people do not simply suddenly decide to protest a policy or even a political system and then form a social movement with a coherent ideology that is capable of overthrowing an existing power structure. Successful social movements require extensive organizational resources and have many stages and key moments through which they develop over time.

2. In my talk, I focus specifically on the case of urban Venezuela, as it serves as a good example of how cultural, political, and identity-based social movements have struggled for recognition within urban spaces— the community centers, the shantytowns, the plazas, the streets—as well as those harder-to-define “spaces” such as the airwaves, popular press and television, music and religion and finally, the internet. Because my background is in literary and cultural studies, my perspective on Venezuelan social movements is necessarily one that takes into account cultural actions, texts and manifestations that stand out as particularly significant and are bound up with the study of society, politics, and economics. I could spend many hours talking about the many examples that deserve attention. But given time limitations, I have chosen to start with a general overview of urban social movements and government response in the pre-Chavez days of the mid-to-late twentieth century, followed by the government’s swing towards neoliberalism and retreat from social welfare provision in the 1990s. I will take a close look at pre-Chavez barrio-based popular religious movements like the Maria Lionza cult and the curas obreros (worker priests), the musical group Grupo Madera (music), and finally the seminal moment of the Caracazo (the name given to the wave of protests, riots, looting, shootings and massacres on February 27, 1989 in response to neoliberal austerity measures). Then I turn my attention to the post-Chavez question of what happens when the social movements that struggle to achieve a certain end actually prevail? To do this, I examine two social/cultural groups that function as a result of policies and opportunities made available during the Chavez presidency: the communes and the popular radio movement. Finally I consider the opposition social movements largely located among the business, middle and upper classes both inside Venezuela and in exile, and how they are taking advantage of the enormous power of the internet and social media to create the first virtual social movement in Venezuelan history. I hope to make the areas I focus on interesting and relevant for your classes and students, as one way of looking at aspects of social movements that often get overlooked.