



# Neoliberal Politics and Moral Riots in Bolivia's 'Black February':

## Understanding the Transition to Post-Neoliberalism in South America

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### Abstract

Widespread riots and seemingly chaotic uprisings have played a key role in recent processes of social, political, and economic change throughout the world—from overthrowing neoliberal governments in Latin America to the 'Arab Spring'. Drawing on archival research and in-depth interviews, I scrutinise a two-day massive riot during February 2003 in La Paz, Bolivia, known as 'Black February'. The event shook the neoliberal order in Bolivia and was closely followed by the massive uprisings of October 2003 that toppled the President, opening political opportunities for the rise of Evo Morales and his Movement Towards Socialism (in power since 2006). I analyse these events and their contentious performances to suggest that they targeted the political system rather than the institutions of neoliberal governance. Analyses of the contemporary 'Left turn' in Latin America explain the demise of governments that followed the IMF and World Bank's recommendations as a result of the deleterious consequences of *neoliberal policies*. I argue that in order to understand the rise of Left-wing governments we need to analyse the massive revolts that preceded them and pay more attention to the connections between neoliberal policies and *neoliberal politics* (i.e. the political systems supporting neoliberal policies). The Bolivian case illustrates that collective actions performed during massive revolts are underpinned by moral understandings and the drawing of symbolic boundaries, and that they can create turning

points in historical trajectories. I examine the methodological challenges of studying leaderless and spontaneous protests, suggesting that the analysis of symbolically charged performances and the situated actions of participants can shed light on this type of events. Beyond the Bolivian case, the article seeks to bridge the literatures on contentious politics and 'eventful sociology'.

**Keywords** Neoliberalism; Bolivia; Riots; Latin American Left turn; Contentious Politics; Eventful Sociology

### Introduction

'Men and women of Bolivia, good evening. Bolivia is at a crossroads. If we keep spending more than we make, we are surely headed towards bankruptcy and economic collapse, much like what happened in Argentina...If we are going to finance the matching funds that are needed to receive foreign aid...we need more income'.<sup>1</sup>

On the night of Sunday February 9, 2003, Bolivian President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada addressed the nation in a televised speech to announce a 12.5% income tax on the people earning more than double the minimum wage. The goal of the measure was to reduce the fiscal deficit and thus comply with the recommendations of the International Monetary Fund (Shultz 2008).

On Tuesday, February 11, the rank and file of the national police organised a strike and occupied police buildings in downtown La Paz. On Wednesday,

February 12, the police and the military engaged in a deadly clash around Plaza Murillo, the square in downtown La Paz where the Presidential Palace and Congress are located. From the afternoon until night, hundreds of people filled the streets of downtown La Paz, looting and burning public buildings, the offices of political parties, and several shops.

The next day, February 13, demonstrators mobilised in downtown La Paz and were brutally repressed by the military. As a result of this short and violent uprising, at least 36 people were killed and more than 200 wounded. Because of its deadly toll, the events are popularly known in Bolivia as 'Black February' (APDHB et al. 2004).

In October 2003, just eight months after these events, massive mobilisations against gas exports to Chile resulted in the resignation of President Sánchez de Lozada. After two years of provisional governments besieged by social protests, Evo Morales (leader of the powerful coca-growers union) became president in 2006, following a landslide victory. Morales was re-elected in 2009 with 64% of the vote, and his political party, Movement Towards Socialism (MAS), has arguably inaugurated a new political regime in Bolivia (Dunkerley 2007; Kohl 2010; Postero 2010; Stefanoni and Do Alto 2006).

Drawing on in-depth interviews and archival research,<sup>2</sup> I scrutinise the February 2003 events to advance an argument about contemporary sociopolitical changes in South America, where Left-leaning administrations have taken power during the last decade. I claim that, by and large, scholars have explained this 'Left turn' as a result of the negative consequences of the *neoliberal policies* of the 1990s. I contend that, in order to understand the transition from neoliberalism to Left-leaning governments in the region, we need to pay more attention to the links between protests, neoliberal policies, and neoliberal *politics* (Arce and Rice 2009).

I analyse the 'Black February' events as the empirical material to bridge literatures on contentious politics and 'eventful sociology' (Sewell Jr 2005; Tilly 2008). I scrutinise the *events* of February, zooming in on the actions of 'the crowd' in time and space to pay attention to the sequencing of the events, the ways in

which the urban layout of La Paz influenced contention, and the significance of the targets and performances of looters. These events, I argue, expressed moral understandings and drew symbolic boundaries between 'the people' and the political regime, creating the conditions that resulted in the transition from a neoliberal regime to the current 'post-neoliberal' order. The analysis presented below thus engages two strands of research: the literature on riots within social movement studies and political sociology (e.g. Abu-Lughod 2007; Roy 1994; Tilly 2003; Wilkinson 2009) and the scholarship analysing the relationship between structural adjustment and riots in Latin America (Almeida 2007; Shefner, Pasdirtz and Blad 2006; Walton and Seddon 1994).

### The Black February Events

In early 2003, Sánchez de Lozada's government was discussing tax policies to meet the requirements of the IMF. The latter demanded a decrease in Bolivia's fiscal deficit from 8.7% to 5.5% of the GDP as a condition to receive new loans. To do so, the government decided to extend the income tax to the population earning at or above twice the minimum wage (Shultz 2009). On Sunday, February 9, Sánchez de Lozada publicly announced the new tax in a televised speech, and reactions swiftly followed. Evo Morales (then leader of coca leaf growers, who came in second in the 2002 presidential elections) called for popular resistance against the new policy and asked for the President's resignation. Businessmen associations rejected the tax, and the COB (*Central Obrera Boliviana*, Bolivian Workers Union) called for a general strike on February 13.

On Monday night, February 10, near the presidential palace, low-rank policemen gathered in a police station, locked the building's doors with chains and metal bars, and declared a strike. That night and throughout February 11, the rebellious policemen and their commanders engaged in negotiations with the government without reaching an agreement. The police mutiny extended to several units in La Paz and throughout the country. The next day, February 12, the headquarters of the GES (*Grupo Especial de*

*Seguridad*, Special Group on Security) became the epicenter of the strike – located half a block from the Presidential Palace and Plaza Murillo, La Paz's central square. At mid-morning, high school students in La Paz arrived to Plaza Murillo as part of a demonstration demanding the reappointment of a school principal. Because there were no police patrolling downtown, the students easily reached Plaza Murillo. When students approached the Presidential Palace, the military guarding the building reacted by shooting tear gas at the demonstrators, who in turn threw stones at the military while running towards the GES building. As the military shot tear gas at the students located near the GES building, policemen responded in kind. In the ensuing hours, the conflict escalated: military and policemen engaged in a harsh confrontation, shooting deadly ammunition at each other, resulting in the deaths of four military (three of them conscripts between 20 and 21 years old) and four civilians (between 16 and 22 years old). That evening, the President announced the lifting of the tax while government officials and policemen negotiated an end to the strike.

### The Moral of the Crowd in Downtown La Paz

While policemen and the military jockeyed to gain positions in and around Plaza Murillo, a series of public buildings and the offices of virtually every political party were being looted and burned. The first targets were the buildings of the vice presidency and the Ministry of Labor located two blocks from each other and two blocks from the Presidential Palace and Plaza Murillo. The nearby Central Bank, however, which is home to the offices of the IMF in Bolivia, was not attacked. Similarly, the municipal offices of La Paz, located around the corner from the vice presidency, did not suffer any damage. In other words, the targets of the crowd were selective: although there are several significant sites near Plaza Murillo, only the buildings representing the national government were looted. At the office of the vice president, guards initially repelled looters by shooting tear gas, but a group eventually broke into the building and created a bonfire

on the street using antique furniture, books, papers, and everything they could find in the offices. With the building in flames, a fire truck appeared at the corner, but soon turned around when 'welcomed' by demonstrators throwing stones.

A group of students from the History Department of UMSA, the main university of La Paz, gathered at the vice president's office. Diego was one of them; he ended up there after witnessing the events in Plaza Murillo and meeting with friends and other students at the university. He witnessed the following interaction among protesters:

I remember this boy who was taking a computer with him, and taking several things underneath his clothes. Then the activists and the crowd said 'No! Thief! Thief! Burn that! Burn that!' So the guy threw the monitor [to the fire] but he was taking the CPU with him! And the people made him throw the CPU into the fire too (...) It was very funny, because the people took the things out from the security checkpoint, and they were burning the desks, the notebooks and telephones... and also the porn magazines! It was very funny; they were showing, *exhibiting* the magazines they found there.<sup>3</sup>

Demonstrators on February 12 were drawing moral boundaries by destroying and burning valuable goods, instead of stealing them (Thompson 1971). The exhibition of porn magazines, although anecdotal, shows a moral judgment on the part of the rioters that was displayed in a number of looted sites. For instance, at the Ministry of Labour, located two blocks west of the vice presidency, similar scenes of burned buildings combined with the condemnation of stealing. Marcelo was working as a journalist for a TV network and witnessed the events firsthand:

Marcelo – Nothing was stolen at the Ministry of Labour; everything was burned (...) computers, furniture, anything went to the fire at the Ministry of Labour.

PL – You mean people were coming in and out of the building...

M –... and throwing things into the fire. I did not see anything stolen at the Ministry of Labor. As a matter of fact, at the corner of the ministry, there was an incident with the woman who sells candy there. Her stand was attacked, and people began to steal the

candy. They turned the stand upside down, but the people surrounded the thieves. And they began to shout, 'She's from the people! She's from the people! (*¡Es-del-pue-blo! ¡Es-del-pue-blo!*)'. The other guys found themselves on the spot so they took the candy out of their pockets and returned it. The people then put the stand upright, tied it with tape, and put it aside, inside a house.

Marcelo recalled another incident that suggests the continuities between everyday grievances and the riot:

I saw an old man going inside the Ministry of Labor, an elderly man who could barely walk. And then the old man was in one of the windows, holding a computer over his head, and he throws the computer to the street and raises his arms, like [he was] celebrating a victory. When he comes out the building, we interviewed the man and he told us, 'I've worked 35 years of my life in the mines, I have been a miner, and now I'm penniless, and the Ministry of Labour never, never has done anything with the company I worked for to get social benefits and my retirement. And now I am starving to death, and this government doesn't do anything. But now, I screw them!' He added, 'Because that secretary who had *that computer* never wanted to listen to me, she didn't listen to me!'

The next targets of rioters were the offices of every important political party ruling Bolivia since 1985: ADN (*Acción Democrática Nacional*, National Democratic Action), the party of Hugo Banzer Suárez (former dictator in 1971-1978 and president in 1997-2001), MIR (the party of former president Jaime Paz Zamora, 1989-1993), MNR (the party of then president Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada), and UCS (the party of Samuel Doria Medina, a businessman turned politician). In the offices of political parties, rioters replicated the interactions performed in public buildings: offices were sacked and burned, and demonstrators coerced people to burn the computers and goods, not allowing taking items with them. Participants in the riot reprimanded looters, saying that they were there 'to protest and not to steal'. Mario, an activist from a leftist group at the university, summarised this point by saying:

For those leading that struggle, it wasn't about taking stuff; it was mainly about... burning everything.

Like, they made a campaign against you. They say: 'he's a thief, he doesn't care about the country, he's not mobilised to improve; he wants to steal'. So, because of the anger against that dirty campaign... it is better if the computers remain over there, destroyed. So, if anybody came to take something [another one said] 'no, leave it there'.

Why were public ministries and political parties so angrily attacked? Where did this rejection of political parties come from? And why did the crowd prevent people from stealing things? All the political parties which had their locales looted on February 12 were part and parcel of the '*democracia pactada*', the political arrangement that ruled Bolivia and imposed neoliberal policies from 1985 onwards. The trajectory of then-President Gonzalo 'Goni' Sánchez de Lozada is a clear example of how neoliberal policies were coupled with traditional political parties. As part of Victor Paz Estenssoro's cabinet in 1985, he served as minister of the MNR administration, working for the program that curbed inflation and set the milestone for neoliberal policies in Bolivia, the 'Decree 21060'. During his first presidency (1993-1997) Sánchez de Lozada also supported the privatisation of public assets by the so-called 'capitalisation' of state-owned companies. In the December 2002 elections, Sánchez de Lozada and Jaime Paz Zamora sealed an agreement to distribute appointments in their administrations between members of the MNR and MIR.

The actions of the crowds in Black February can thus be seen as a rejection of neoliberal policies, but one that was mainly expressed as a repudiation of the political system that put those policies into place. If we locate the events of February in the period immediately preceding the riot, we can see how media framings of the 'political class' informed the actions of the crowd. Between November and December 2002, Bolivian mass media aired, almost every day and many times on the front cover, reports on a series of wrongdoings by politicians and political parties: increases in government expenditures and bureaucracy, an exorbitant budget in the Legislature, payment of extra bonuses to Congressmen, illegal discounts given to public officials to finance political parties, abusive contracts of external consultants, nepotism and influence peddling payment of

elaborate celebrations with taxpayers' money, and denunciations of the lack of work discipline among politicians. The use of obscure 'classified funds' (*gastos reservados*) in both the executive branch and Congress clearly showed the legalisation of parallel finances in all the branches of the state.<sup>4</sup>

The involvement of traditional parties in schemes to use public positions for private benefit sheds light on why the February riots discharged such a fury against political symbols and (with the same eagerness) condemned those who were attempting to steal from public buildings. A closer reading of how the press pictured the 'political class' helps to integrate both the outbreak of lootings and the attitudes displayed by the crowd in specific sites. People set a boundary by censuring those attempting to steal, a boundary separating 'us', the demonstrators, from 'them', the politicians taking advantage of public institutions for their personal gain. Very much like lootings in Argentina in 1989, the crowd in Bolivia's Black February displayed a 'self-controlled looting performance' (Serulnikov 1994: 79). In Argentina, looters in 1989 were eager to explain their behaviours to the press and make clear that they were only stealing food. Similarly, Bolivians made clear they were there not to steal goods but to destroy political symbols. By sacking the locales of every major political party and several public offices, the crowd was expressing their rejection of the system of the '*democracia pactada*' and, by the same token, they were asserting the political (and not 'egoistic') character of their actions.

There is no doubt that the new income tax—a policy inspired by neoliberal economics—was at the root of the February riot. The depiction of the political system in the media helped to frame the income tax as a new attempt to extract resources from the public to be used for the benefit of politicians and their parties.<sup>5</sup> Yet the identification of the riot's trigger should not overshadow what happened *during* the uprising. Analysts of riots in France in 2005 and 2007 and in Greece in 2008 make a similar point: cases of police brutality may have triggered the uprisings, but there are also other underlying causes (in those cases, ethnic and economic) that provide a fuller explanation of the events (Karamichas 2009; Schneider

2008).

Riots, with their intrinsic lack of programs and spokespersons, can be 'read' by observing the targets and actions of rioters (Serulnikov 1994: 75), since 'the targets of attack are selective and meaningful' (Walton 1989: 317). Or, as Michael Rosenfeld studying the 1992 'Bull Riot' in Chicago put it: 'The tendency to classify riots by their precipitating event, rather than their long-term underlying causes, is understandable mainly because precipitating events are usually singular and accessible while underlying causes may be multiple and opaque' (1997: 497). A closer observation at targets and interactions shed light on the political character of the events and the situational logic guiding the actions of participants.

### Looted Sites and Situated Action

As night approached on February 12, a second wave of attacks was directed at a series of shops and commercial galleries in La Paz. Although the targets of the crowd were of a different kind (from public buildings and political parties to privately-owned businesses), a close observation shows a *transition* from political protest to opportunistic lootings. The geographic space where the nighttime lootings took place was the avenue Mariscal Santa Cruz, better known in La Paz as *El Prado*. *El Prado* is a boulevard southwest of Plaza Murillo, which extends from the *Plaza del Estudiante* and San Francisco Square. Several *maisons* that line the avenue are reminiscent of the *belle époque* of Bolivian history. *El Prado* is the dorsal spine of La Paz's downtown car traffic, where 'middle class' life takes place and commuters move around. It is also the location of several public buildings, and the avenue where most demonstrations pass through as they march from *Plaza del Estudiante* to San Francisco Square.

The Ministry of Sustainable Development is located at the intersection of *El Prado* and Ayacucho Street, just three blocks down from Plaza Murillo. The looting of this building is noteworthy because it shows how the actions of the crowd transitioned from a political statement to 'opportunistic lootings'. Policemen usually guard the building, but they left

their positions on the evening of February 12, when the mutiny expanded among police units. Around five in the afternoon, a group of people carrying a burning cart brought from the MIR stopped in front of the Ministry. They pulled out bus-stop poles and used them as levers to open the metallic curtain of the building and shortly after a crowd entered the lobby. They threw Molotov cocktails, setting the place on fire. A young man broke into the garage, drove two vans into the garage's doors and opened them wide; people entered and sacked everything they could find in the parked automobiles. TV sets, computers and radios that were removed from the building ended up in a huge fire on the street. The moral attitudes of the crowd began to subside: the appliances taken from the building were destroyed instead of being stolen, but people with tools took everything they could find in the cars parked in the garage, while no one seemed to reprehend their behaviour.

Almost simultaneously, the crowd started to loot private shops: a Burger King, two of the most renowned cafés of La Paz (Café Ciudad and Café Marbella), the building of the Chamber of Commerce, banks and ATMs, and several malls. At first glance, these attacks seem to pinpoint the crowd's move from attacking political symbols to simple pillage. However, a closer examination suggests another interpretation. Samuel Doria Medina is the owner of Burger King in Bolivia: he is a notorious businessman and the head of the UCS political party. In fact, one of the looted malls near San Francisco Square has a name (Dorian) that resembles 'Doria Medina'. According to the mall's guard, people at the forefront of the crowd shouted, 'this place is owned by Doria Medina'. At the Café Ciudad, people threw stones, destroyed the floor-to-ceiling windows, and stole furniture. Café Ciudad is owned by Jose 'Pepelucho' Paredes, a politician of MIR (part of the government's coalition) and then-mayor of El Alto, whose trajectory is tainted by a series of accusations of corruption (Lapegna and Auyero 2012). In Café Marbella, all the furniture was stolen and what could not be taken away was destroyed by the multitude. Politicians do not own Café Marbella but it certainly is a place they

frequent; it is also usually populated with foreign tourists and 'men in suits'.<sup>6</sup> Like Café Marbella, some of the looted malls also were symbols of class and ethnic hierarchy. The inventories of the stolen goods provide an approximation of the kind of shops looted: most of them offered merchandise that was not affordable for the majority of Bolivians.<sup>7</sup>

The actions of the crowd on the night of February 12 showed how the lootings became 'opportunistic', i.e. people profited by aiming to obtain valuable goods. Nonetheless, a closer examination of the actions and motivations of participants in these lootings offers a more complex picture than the one popularised by mass media. Much like Gustav Le Bon's understanding of riots in the nineteenth century in terms of the irrationality and marginality of individual rioters (Rule 1988), the narrative of the events presented by newspapers described the lootings as the exclusive deeds of criminals and thieves. As reconstructed above, this was not the case for the initial lootings of public buildings. But even in the lootings aimed to simply steal valuable goods, a 'situational logic' seemed to guide the actions of participants. This point can be illustrated by in-depth interviews with direct participants in the lootings, showing that 'rioters often understand their own actions in ways very different from the interpretations we have access to in the press and government reports' (Wilkinson 2009: 331).

Saul is now in his twenties and at the moment of the 2003 riot, he was a high school student. He lives in Villa Fatima, a lower-middle class neighborhood in the outskirts of La Paz. Neighbours of Villa Fatima and several surrounding areas gathered to march to downtown La Paz to protest the income tax and the government's repression. Saul's mother is a community leader, but he went to La Paz by himself 'for the fun of it' (*yo estaba solo de diversión*).<sup>8</sup> Saul first arrived at the area of Sagárnaga Street, near San Francisco square, where popular demonstrations usually meet. There, he witnessed lootings in the stores; he saw the military police throw tear gas at looters; he watched another man in the crowd teach others how to neutralize the gases by pouring water on the

grenades. While youngsters threw the grenades back, some demonstrators showed the less experienced rioters how to use torches and the smoke of cigarettes to mitigate the effects of tear gas. After a helicopter appeared on the scene, shooting at looters from the sky, Saul left the area and walked north. He arrived near Plaza Eguino, where he saw a Manaco shop, a famous Bolivian chain of shoe stores, being looted.<sup>9</sup>

Saul – I was there [in front of the Manaco store], and I see people coming out with new tennis shoes (...) I went in and I took some stuff (...) Since I had my backpack, a guy I met there tells me: 'You know what? I have here five pairs of shoes, let's put this in your backpack and I keep taking [shoes] out and you put them there'.

PL – Did you know him?

S – No, no, I met him there, but he trusted me... We left and went to another Manaco [but] the military police came. (...) I escaped and went through Pando Street. I got to the House of Democracy [ADN party offices]. It was burning (...) And I saw how they were throwing computers from the top floor, people who went there to burn things, but there were also opportunists. And I remember when they were burning, throwing furniture and documents to the fire. And I said to myself, I better leave, and I see a guy coming out with a PC... and another one with a monitor, and another one with a radio. And I said, damn! And I came back... And people were taking things. Young people and older people took the things from them [saying,] 'no, no, we are not stealing'. And they took the things and put them in the fire. I got to the top floor, I almost suffocated, couldn't stand the smoke (...) and finally I had the courage to go upstairs again. And I remember [I was] with a group of six people [and] we made it to the top floor. We helped each other [to climb the stairs, almost on fire] (...) And on the top floor, nothing was burning, everything was untouched. I was about to go downstairs... and I said: what am I going to take? And the only thing left was the carpet. And I unglued it, all by myself.

Saul walked to Kennedy Street; he wanted to take a cab but he did not have enough money. He sold the shoes he took from Manaco to a passerby, and kept walking, dragging the carpet. At the entrance of a 'nightclub', the owner of the place bought the carpet for 100 Bolivianos (15 dollars).

An interview with another direct participant in the

events, Diego, also calls attention to the 'seductions of crime' (Katz 1988) involved in the lootings: the fact that the 'criminal' actions of rioters are better understood when seen as a result of interactions rather than stemming from 'predispositions'. Diego (who was also present at the looting of the vice presidency) went to San Francisco Square with a friend:

And I saw a group of people shouting: 'We have to go to the Huyustus, to the Eloy Salmon! [An area with appliances and electronics shops]'. We were tired, but I was tempted... because we also saw a group of people with a wooden pole, and they were carrying it as a battering ram! (...) When we passed by Murillo Street, we saw a very funny thing. We saw a guy carrying an old typing machine, an antique, hardly carrying the thing, suffering... We kept walking and we saw a group of kids, you could tell they were homeless kids, those you find in the area sniffing glue. These guys were storing things there, in a little corner of Murillo Street, near some stairs. They had everything: machines, CPUs, computer paper, fax paper, office stuff... And the guys were carrying the things; it was like Ali Baba's cave!

The narratives of Saul and Diego highlight an improvisation of actions that counterbalances the image of looters, so pervasive in mass media accounts, as delinquents waiting to seize the moment after the police vacate the streets. The vivid narration of direct participants in the events stresses the spontaneity and diversion of participation ('I went for the fun of it'; 'we saw a very funny thing'), the solidarities created among looters in the heat of the moment ('I met him there, but he trusted me'), and the thin line dividing a curious witness from a looter ('And I say to myself, I better leave, and I see somebody with a PC... And I said, damn! And I came back'; 'Me and my friend were tired, but I was tempted').

The actions of Saul and Diego, in short, emphasise the indexicality of actions at play (Garfinkel 1984); their actions were not planned in advance but context-dependent. Looting 'is certainly an ambiguous social action between resistance and delinquency' (Serulnikov 1994: 78), but this ambiguity should not obscure that the search for individual gains may also express contestation. As James Scott has argued, 'lower class politics' usually fuses self-interest and

resistance: ‘the problem lies in what is a misleading, sterile, and sociologically naïve insistence upon distinguishing “self-indulgent”, individual acts, one the one hand, from presumably “principled”, selfless, collective actions, on the other, and excluding the former from the category of *real* resistance’ (1985: 295, emphasis in original).

On February 13, looting subsided and La Paz was the scene of a series of demonstrations demanding the withdrawal of the income tax. By then, the leaders of the police strike reached an agreement with government authorities, and policemen joined the military in repressing the protests. When people gathered in San Francisco Square, military snipers shot deadly ammunition at them, killing and wounding several more demonstrators. The complex relationship between mobilisation and repression is beyond the scope of this paper; what is clear is that whereas on February 12 demonstrators overtook the city, by February 13 the opposite relationship of forces seemed to prevail. The combined actions of police patrolling the streets and military shooting at unarmed demonstrators brought the uprising to an end.

## Conclusions

In a recent book synthesising more than four decades of scholarship, Sidney Tarrow dedicates an insightful chapter to connecting the literature on eventful historiography and the study of cycles of contention (2012: 115-130). In it, he regrets the lack of dialogue between William Sewell’s scholarship on ‘eventful history’ (zooming in on the ‘thick description of temporally ordered, contingent, and structurally ruptural events’), Charles Tilly’s ‘events-in-history’ approach (focused on the ‘combination of performances, episodes, and repertoires’) and ‘event histories’, the statistical analysis of contentious gatherings exemplified by the work of Susan Olzak (Olzak 1989). ‘The danger is that each of the approaches’, Tarrow writes, ‘will drive those who adopt them into such different methods and perspectives that each group of specialists will proceed in blissful indifference to the contributions of the others’ (Tarrow 2012: 130). In this paper, following Tarrow, I took a first stab at connect-

ing specific events and their broader political context, while attending to the links between everyday interactions and extraordinary events, and the role of conjuncture and improvisation among participants.

First, I hope to have shown that, while neoliberal policies can be seen as the trigger of Black February, the main issue behind the initial actions of the crowd was a political one. A close inspection of the interactions between rioters and their targets shows that we should pay attention not only to neoliberal *policies* but also to neoliberal *politics*. Existent analyses tend to explain Black February as a direct effect of economic arrangements, glossing over the actual events and the meanings that transpired during the riot. Most depictions of Black February thus present two problems: they either offer an iteration of a ‘spasmodic view’ about riots (Thompson 1971), assuming that economic hardship suffices to explain looting and revolts; or, they use the ‘steam boiler’ metaphor (Tilly 2003), which understands riots as sudden explosions fed by rage, irrationality and spontaneity. In contrast, my goal was to take E.P. Thompson’s question seriously: ‘being hungry (...) what do people do?’ (1971: 49-50). Following Thompson’s question and avoiding ‘steam boiler’ preconceptions, I considered neoliberal policies as the backdrop of Black February but concentrated on the mediations between a set of economic policies and the emergence *and development* of a riot, considering that ‘the identification of larger factors related to the occurrence of riots is different from the examination of the chain of causalities that produce them’ (Auyero 2001: 35). In other words, policies of structural adjustment provide the background conditions for a riot to take place, but they are of little help to discern the course and the meanings of popular contention once the events are triggered. I have thus focused on the political and relational aspects of the riot, assuming that a relational field of contention mediates between structural causes and massive protests (Auyero 2003; Auyero 2007).

Second, I avoided the assumption of seeing Black February as a moment of total rupture and instead I identified certain continuities between the riot’s ‘moment of madness’ (Zolberg 1972) and quotidian relationships. As sociologists Frances Fox Piven and

Richard Cloward asserted, 'it is the daily experience of people that shapes their grievances, establishes the measure of their demands, and points out the targets of their anger' (1979: 20-21). The old man destroying the computer of a *particular* public official ignoring his pleas, for example, illustrates the connections between everyday grievances and extraordinary moments of contentious collective action. In short, in any given riot or contentious event, spontaneity may operate yet within important limits (Tilly 2006: 71).

Third, the analysis of the events suggests the challenges of studying massive but brief upheavals and the problems of encapsulating a riot under a unifying interpretation. Lootings transitioned from attacks on public and political symbols, to lootings of private shops owned by or connected to politicians, to outright lootings of private shops. Nonetheless, this close observation of the motivations of looters demonstrates that, during a riot, boundaries between resistance and theft are blurred and, rather than criminals, many of the participants in the events were merely seizing the moment. In addition, my fieldwork in La Paz allowed me to see that some of the private shops targeted by looters (such as Burger King and the cafés in *El Prado*) were actually an attack on sites that symbolise the Bolivian political class.

The previous analysis, of course, contains a number of limitations suggesting lines of future research. First, I came short of locating Black February in a systematic comparison with previous and subsequent upheavals. Particularly, a comparison with the contentious event of October 2003, that occurred just months after the February upheaval, presents an opportunity to investigate patterns of path dependency between contentious events (Abbott 2001; Blee 2012; Mahoney and Schensul 2006). Second, and closely related, the picture presented in this paper could be broadened by triangulating qualitative data with a larger chain of events assembled in catalogs of contentious events (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2008). The data and analysis of this paper could also be complemented with further research on similar events that took place contemporaneously in Santa Cruz, Cochabamba, Oruro, and other Bolivian cities. Third, future research may render fruitful results by compar-

ing the February 2003 riot with similar events in other countries. For instance, existent research on the Argentine case of December 2001 may provide an interesting counterpoint to better understand riots and popular contention in contemporary Latin America.

As massive revolts topple regimes and presidents from the 'Arab Spring' in 2011 to Ukraine in 2014, and leaderless protests emerge throughout the world (from the Occupy movement in the United States and the Indignados in Spain, to the wave of mobilisations in Brazil in June-July of 2013), the mechanisms and consequences of riots and upheavals and their impact on the political process demand further research. By analysing the relationship between riots in La Paz and the demise of the neoliberal regime in Bolivia, my paper contributes to the scholarship on the contemporary 'Left turn' in Latin American politics and, more broadly, to the study of riots and revolts as political events. In doing so, I shed light on the connections between collective action and the loss of legitimacy in the political system, arguing that the economic inequalities created by neoliberal policies are a necessary but not sufficient condition to explain the emergence of 'post-neoliberal' regimes in Latin America.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *La Prensa*, February 10, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> I collected data in Bolivia in September 2006 and January-March 2009. The data included 42 interviews (with journalists, activists, shop owners, bystanders, looters, lawyers, organizational leaders, and public officials); newspapers stories (*La Razon* and *La Prensa*, January-April 2000, October-December 2002 and January-March 2003; and *El Diario*, June-July 2000 and February 2003); two 'political magazines' (*Juguete Rabioso* and *Pulso*, January-May 2003); files from the lawsuits triggered by the riots; two 400-page reports prepared by the Chamber of Commerce; raw footage from two Bolivian TV networks; three documentaries ('Fusil-metralla, el pueblo no se calla', HBO's production 'Our brand is crisis', and 'Febrero de 2003. Principio y fin del poder' produced by the Universidad Mayor San Andrés); and audio

recordings from *Radio Pachamama*.

<sup>3</sup> Interviewed in La Paz, March 4, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> See *La Razón*, November 7, 11, 21, 22, 23, 24, 26, and 28 of 2002; *La Razón*, December 6, 12, 13, 15, and 19 of 2002; and *La Prensa*, December 3, 4, 5, 6, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 23 of 2002.

<sup>5</sup> See Snow (2004) for a review of the literature on framing.

<sup>6</sup> The aforementioned Dorian mall shares similar 'enclave' characteristics: 30% of its shops are travel agencies and the rest are oriented to textiles tourism for export (Chamber of Commerce, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> An overview of the inventories of stolen merchandise suggests the characteristics of the typical looted commerce: the *average* price of merchandise in five shops was of 14, 23, 26, 41 and 177 dollars (Chamber of Commerce 2003). The monthly minimum wage in Bolivia in 2003 was 61 dollars [NOTE: here do you mean per month? We usually calculate minimum wage as hourly pay, be clear 61 dollars for what period of time?].

<sup>8</sup> Interviewed in La Paz on February 9, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Manaco stores were also looted in the mid-1980s during the economic crisis of the UDP's government.

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