Self-Organized Rupture: The Pucallpazo and Bottom-Up Institutional Change in the Peruvian Amazon (1978–1981)

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Abstract

This article examines the Pucallpazo (1978–1981), a mass mobilization in the Amazonian city of Pucallpa that culminated in the creation of the Department of Ucayali and a reorganization of Peru's territorial state. Integrating Hogan's (2006) framework with insights from Mahoney & Thelen (2010) and adaptive complex-systems theory (Miller and Page 2007), the study diagnoses whether this transformation represented a case of gradual adaptation or a bottom-up critical juncture.

Using qualitative process tracing and hermeneutic reconstruction of fragmented local archives and oral histories, the analysis identifies a three-stage mechanism linking endogenous tension, emergent mobilization, and institutional rupture. The Pucallpazo satisfies Hogan's SSE criteria—significance, swiftness, and encompassing scope—confirming it as a self-organized rupture that redefined sovereignty relations between center and periphery.

Comparative evidence shows that while many Latin American bottom-up movements expand participation, few cross the threshold of reconfiguration. The Pucallpazo achieved this by combining cross-sectoral coalition-building, strategic nonviolence, and the juridical translation of protest into law. The study concludes that subnational contention can generate state rescaling from below, offering new methodological and theoretical tools for understanding how emergent, peripheral mobilizations produce enduring institutional change.

Keywords: Critical junctures; bottom-up democratization; adaptive complex systems; institutional change; state rescaling; subnational politics; Peru; Pucallpazo; historical institutionalism; emergent coordination; self-organized mobilization; Amazonian region.

1 Introduction

In 1978, a mass mobilization erupted in the Amazonian city of Pucallpa, a peripheral district then belonging to the Department of Loreto. What began as a regional protest rapidly transformed into a political event of national resonance: within three years, this collective action led to the legal creation of a new department—Ucayali—thereby altering Peru's territorial and administrative structure. This episode, known as the Pucallpazo, stands as the only case in Peruvian history in which a district-level population successfully achieved the foundation of a new department. How can such an event be characterized in institutional terms? Was it a gradual adaptation of the centralist state, or did it represent a discontinuous rupture—a critical juncture—that redefined the country's political geography?

This article argues that the Pucallpazo constitutes a subnational critical juncture—a moment of discontinuous institutional change that reconfigured the Peruvian state's relationship with its Amazonian periphery. Following Hogan's (2006) *Remoulded Critical Junctures* approach, a critical juncture occurs when a pre-existing structural cleavage generates a rupture that leads to significant, swift, and encompassing institutional transformation. In the case of Pucallpa, the generative cleavage was the long-standing distributional conflict inherent in the center–periphery divide, which had left the city politically and economically subordinated to Loreto's distant capital, Iquitos. The first Pucallpazo in 1978 activated this cleavage, marking the moment when subordinate actors ceased to comply with the existing institutional arrangement and mobilized to overwhelm the central state's capacity to sustain the status quo. The subsequent creation of the Department of Ucayali (1980–1981) produced a reorganization of state authority, not a mere administrative reform.

Not all institutional transformations arise from rupture, however. As Hogan (2006) emphasizes, many historical sequences unfold through layering, conversion, drift, or displacement—mechanisms of gradual change that modify institutions without breaking them. Building on this insight, Mahoney and Thelen (2010) argue that institutional change is not driven solely by exogenous shocks but can emerge endogenously, from within institutions themselves. Because rules are inherently ambiguous and their enforcement contested, institutions are political orders whose continuity requires active maintenance and mobilization. Change occurs when actors exploit these ambiguities or when power shifts weaken the coalitions that sustain compliance.

Distinguishing between such internal, gradual adaptations and truly discontinuous ruptures is essential for identifying when a process constitutes a full critical juncture. The Pucallpazo cannot be categorized under any of these gradual mechanisms: it did not layer new rules atop old ones, reinterpret existing norms, or drift through neglect. Rather, it replaced the existing territorial order altogether through deliberate collective

action and state negotiation—an abrupt and irreversible institutional rupture.

The literature on democratization and institutional change in Latin America has long been dominated by top-down, national-level explanations that emphasize elite pacts, negotiated transitions, and macroeconomic reform (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Huntington 2002). More recent scholarship, however, has turned attention to subnational and mobilization-driven processes, where collective action, protest, and local experimentation challenge centralized authority. Studies from Brazil, Bolivia, Mexico, Argentina, and Chile reveal that bottom-up or hybrid movements can at times prompt negotiation or reform, but rarely achieve durable institutional redesign (Abers 2000; Leyva Solano 2005; Silva 2009; Postero 2017; Somma and Donoso 2022). Against this backdrop, the Pucallpazo stands out as a rare case in which collective protest produced a formal and enduring reorganization of the state, resulting in the creation of an entirely new department within Peru.

The analytical contribution of this study is twofold. First, it extends the critical juncture framework to the subnational scale, demonstrating that such ruptures can occur within the territorial dimensions of the state. Second, it proposes an integrated framework for identifying types of institutional change, combining Hogan's criteria for discontinuous transformation with Mahoney and Thelen's logic of endogenous change. This synthesis allows us to recognize how the endogenous tensions and distributional conflicts that Mahoney and Thelen identify as engines of gradual change can, under conditions of mass mobilization and shifting power balances, overwhelm an institution's adaptive capacity and trigger a Hogan-style critical juncture. In doing so, the paper bridges two strands of historical institutionalism often treated separately: the study of gradual change and the analysis of critical junctures.

Empirically, the paper relies on a combination of archival sources, press materials, and official documents from the late 1970s and early 1980s, complemented by interpretive analysis grounded in historical institutionalism. The approach follows a process-tracing logic, examining how structural conditions (the Amazonian cleavage) interacted with contingent events (mass mobilization, negotiation, and state response) to produce institutional transformation. Rather than viewing the Pucallpazo as an isolated rebellion, it is treated as the critical node in a longer trajectory of Amazonian political assertion.

The argument unfolds in five parts. The next section situates the study within the literature on institutional change and democratization, outlining the distinction between gradual and discontinuous transformations. The third section introduces Hogan's (2006) remoulded framework of critical junctures and operationalizes its criteria for the subnational context. The fourth section presents the empirical analysis of the Pucallpazo, identifying the generative cleavage and evaluating the significance, swiftness, and encompassing nature of the ensuing change. The fifth section contrasts this process with the mechanisms of gradual change described in Streeck and Thelen (2005) and Mahoney and

Thelen (2010), underscoring why the Pucallpazo represents a discontinuous rupture. The conclusion discusses the broader implications for understanding state formation, regional autonomy, and democratization "from below" in Latin America.

Ultimately, this article argues that the Pucallpazo stands as a paradigmatic case of critical-juncture-driven institutional change at the subnational level. Through collective action, a marginalized region compelled the Peruvian state to reconfigure its own architecture—an outcome rarely observed in the country's highly centralized history. By clarifying the type of change the Pucallpazo represents, the paper contributes to both theoretical refinement and empirical understanding of how endogenous institutional tensions, when activated by structural cleavages and political mobilization, can generate transformative and enduring institutional outcomes.

2 Theoretical Framework: Diagnosing Institutional Rupture

The study of institutional change has long been structured by a fundamental dichotomy between theories of gradual evolution and models of abrupt rupture. For decades, the punctuated-equilibrium model—which posits long periods of stability interrupted by exogenous shocks—dominated the field. More recently, scholars have argued that significant change often occurs incrementally through endogenous processes within institutions. This gradualist turn provides powerful tools for explaining adaptation but risks overlooking moments of genuine discontinuity. This section develops an integrated framework to distinguish between these modes of change, combining the logic of endogenous tension with clear criteria for identifying ruptural transformation.

2.1 The Foundations of Endogenous Change

Following Mahoney and Thelen (2010), institutions are best conceived not as neutral rule systems but as distributional instruments laden with power implications. Rules embody political compromises, and sustaining them requires continuous mobilization by those who benefit. Because rules are ambiguous and enforcement contested, stability is never automatic. Actors continually interpret and renegotiate rules to advance their interests. Institutional continuity is therefore a dynamic political outcome, and institutional change a potential product of internal properties—shifting power balances, erosion of compliance, or strategic reinterpretation.

2.2 The Mechanisms of Gradual Transformation

Building on this view, Streeck and Thelen (2005) systematize the study of endogenous change by identifying five distinct modes of gradual transformation. These mechanisms demonstrate how institutions can be fundamentally altered without overt breakdown or

replacement and provide a diagnostic baseline: if an empirical case cannot be characterized by one of these modes, a more discontinuous dynamic is at work.

1. **Displacement** – the rise of subordinate or latent institutions through defection from the dominant logic.
2. **Layering** – introduction of new rules atop existing ones, producing change through differential growth.
3. **Drift** – shifts in outcomes from deliberate neglect amid changing environments.
4. **Conversion** – reinterpretation or redirection of existing institutions toward new purposes.
5. **Exhaustion** – gradual self-undermining or depletion of an institution's capacity to reproduce itself.

These modes reveal that stability and change are deeply intertwined but share a premise: transformation occurs within the shell of the existing order. They explain adaptation, not replacement.

2.3 Critical Junctures: The Criteria for Discontinuous Rupture

In contrast, the critical-juncture framework explains moments of discontinuous rupture. For Hogan (2006), a critical juncture is not merely rapid change but a historical moment when a pre-existing structural cleavage—a deep line of political or social division—is activated, producing a rupture that is significant, swift, and encompassing (SSE). The framework identifies when endogenous tensions exceed an institution's adaptive capacity, leading to a decisive break from the past.

1. **Significant change** redefines core authority relations and redistributes power, transforming the institution's purpose rather than merely adjusting policy.
2. **Swift change** unfolds within a compressed temporal window, accelerating political realignment and setting a durable trajectory.
3. **Encompassing change** extends beyond a single institution to reshape adjacent structures and relationships, altering jurisdictional or territorial boundaries with systemic consequences.

Together, these SSE criteria establish the empirical threshold for a critical juncture—a discontinuity in institutional logic and historical tempo that reorders the political system.

2.3.1 Micro-foundations of Activation

While Hogan defines what constitutes a critical juncture, insights from adaptive complex-systems theory (Miller and Page 2007) clarify how such ruptures emerge from decentralized dynamics. In adaptive systems, heterogeneous agents interact locally, producing non-linear feedback and sensitivity to initial conditions that allow small disturbances to scale into systemic transformations. Applied to Hogan's model, the "activation" of a cleavage can be understood as an emergent process: uncoordinated actors, responding to shared constraints, form unexpected alignments that overwhelm an institution's capacity for incremental adaptation.

This perspective provides Hogan's framework with a behavioral foundation, explaining how bottom-up mobilization can trigger rupture through the self-organizing logic of complex systems.

2.3.2 Defining "Self-Organized Rupture"

Building on this synthesis, this study proposes the concept of **self-organized rupture** to describe a distinct mode of institutional transformation that is endogenous, emergent, and systemic. A self-organized rupture occurs when decentralized, heterogeneous actors—lacking centralized leadership or exogenous shock—generate coordinated pressure that compels the state to replace, rather than adapt, an existing institutional order.

This concept must be distinguished from three related but analytically distinct notions:

- **Nonviolent revolution** (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011) presumes a strategic, often national-level campaign aimed at regime overthrow, typically led by identifiable vanguards. The Pucallpazo, by contrast, sought territorial reconfiguration, not regime change, and emerged through uncoordinated civic synchronization, not strategic design.

- **Constituent moment** (Negri 2006; R. B. Collier and D. Collier 1991) implies an extra-legal act of political founding, often involving constitutional rupture or the assertion of popular sovereignty *ex nihilo*. The Pucallpazo operated within the existing constitutional framework, achieving change through legislative negotiation, not through the declaration of a new political order[1].

- **Institutional entrepreneurship** (DiMaggio 1988; Garud et al. 2007) assumes goal-oriented actors who deliberately design and promote innovations. In the Pu-

[1]It is worth noting that some theoretical traditions, including the one articulated by Negri (2006), might argue that any foundational reconfiguration of political authority—even one channeled through existing legal procedures—contains a "constituent" dimension, as it redefines the source and scope of sovereign power. Our usage of "constituent moment" here is narrower, focusing on the empirical distinction between an extra-legal assertion of popular will and a reform achieved through state-sanctioned negotiation. This operational distinction is central to diagnosing the Pucallpazo's specific pathway to institutional change.

callpazo, no single actor or coalition engineered the outcome; instead, the rupture emerged from local interactions that generated unexpected, system-level effects—a signature of self-organization in complex adaptive systems (Miller and Page 2007).

Unlike these alternatives, self-organized rupture captures cases where institutional breakdown arises from below through decentralized mobilization that overwhelms the state's capacity for gradual adaptation. It is not a revolution, not a founding, and not a design—but a rupture that assembles itself.

2.4 An Integrated Diagnostic Framework

Bringing these perspectives together enables a precise diagnosis of institutional change. Mahoney and Thelen explain why institutions are vulnerable to transformation through internal conflicts and ambiguous enforcement. Streeck and Thelen specify how gradual change unfolds through identifiable mechanisms. Hogan defines when tensions culminate in rupture. The adaptive-systems lens clarifies how heterogeneous actors activate these tensions, while the concept of self-organized rupture sharpens the boundary between disruptive mobilization and institutional redesign.

This synthesis produces a continuum for analysis:

- Under low or managed tension, change proceeds through gradual mechanisms such as layering or conversion.
- Under escalating tension and weakened enforcement, drift or displacement become more likely.
- When accumulated endogenous tension intersects with a structural cleavage and emergent, uncoordinated mobilization generates unexpected alignments, the result is a self-organized rupture—a critical juncture that overwhelms institutional adaptation and compels formal reconfiguration.

This integrated model functions as a diagnostic tool. It first tests whether a case fits gradual-change patterns; if not, it evaluates the evidence against the SSE criteria for rupture, with self-organized rupture as the explanatory outcome when bottom-up contention produces systemic institutional replacement.

2.5 Research Question and Analytical Expectation

This framework leads to the central question guiding this study:

Under what conditions can bottom-up democratization processes produce a discontinuous reconfiguration of state institutions, rather than being absorbed through gradual adaptation?

Applied to the Peruvian case, the analysis asks whether the Pucallpazo—a subnational episode of collective mobilization—represented a process of incremental adjustment within a centralized state or a self-organized rupture that redefined the territorial architecture of the Peruvian state.

The study employs a two-step diagnostic procedure grounded in competitive theory testing. This method first pits the Pucallpazo against the leading theories of gradual institutional change (Streeck and K. Thelen 2005). If the evidence is incompatible with the mechanisms of layering, conversion, drift, displacement, or exhaustion, we then assess its fit with the theory of institutional rupture (Hogan 2006) by applying Hogan's criteria of significant, swift, and encompassing change.

In essence, the analysis must falsify the plausibility of a gradualist explanation before the argument for a discontinuous, self-organized rupture can be sustained. The following analysis proceeds by first assessing whether the Pucallpazo can be explained through any gradual-change mechanism; only if these alternatives fail to account for the evidence will the event be evaluated against Hogan's criteria to determine whether accumulated endogenous tensions between center and periphery, activated through mass mobilization, produced a rupture that was significant, swift, and encompassing.

3 Research Design and Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design centered on process tracing to reconstruct, interpret, and empirically contrast the stages of the subnational democratization process triggered by the Pucallpazo. The objective is to diagnose whether this episode constitutes a critical juncture in Hogan's (2006) sense—an institutional rupture that was significant, swift, and encompassing (SSE)—or a case of gradual institutional adaptation, as conceptualized by Streeck and Thelen (2005).

The investigation unfolds in four stages:

1. **Historical antecedents**—the long-term configuration of the center–periphery cleavage;

2. **Activation of the potential juncture**—the protest cycles known as the Pucallpazos;

3. **Bottom-up democratization**—the movement's immediate effects and legacies; and

4. **Interpretive synthesis**—integration of empirical evidence to determine whether the transformation meets Hogan's SSE criteria, distinguishing rupture from gradual evolution.

3.1 A Qualitative Process-Tracing Approach

At the core of this research is a process-tracing methodology (D. Collier and Munck 2022) designed to uncover the causal mechanisms linking the pre-existing center–periphery cleavage to the eventual institutional outcome. Process tracing functions here as a diagnostic instrument rather than a linear narrative, allowing systematic evaluation of competing causal explanations of institutional change.

The study adopts a diagnostic testing strategy in which rupture—a critical juncture producing significant, swift, and encompassing change—constitutes the null hypothesis, and gradualism—Streeck and Thelen's incremental mechanisms—serves as the alternative hypothesis. The analysis seeks to falsify the rupture hypothesis by testing the fit of gradual mechanisms; only if none suffice is the null retained, confirming that the Pucallpazo represents a critical juncture.

As Mahoney and Thelen (2010) note, earlier theories of institutional change often relied on exogenous shocks—wars or crises—as triggers of transformation. Their critique, echoed by Streeck and Thelen (2005) and Hogan (2006), highlights that durable institutions contain the seeds of their own change. Transformation is primarily endogenous, emerging from power asymmetries, rule ambiguity, and accumulated tension. Exogenous events may activate these contradictions but do not determine outcomes. Accordingly, this research tests only between endogenous pathways: gradual adaptation and discontinuous rupture.

While Hogan provides the diagnostic criteria, the micro-dynamics of activation can be illuminated through adaptive complex-systems theory (Miller and Page 2007). The Pucallpazo evolved through decentralized interactions among heterogeneous actors. These local-scale interactions generated non-linear feedback loops, which in turn produced emergent coordination across the city—all without any centralized control. The "unexpected alignments" that Hogan associates with critical-juncture activation can thus be understood as the product of an adaptive system sensitive to initial conditions, where minor local triggers produced cascading effects that overwhelmed the state's capacity for incremental adjustment.

Integrating this perspective clarifies how bottom-up democratization can move from dispersed contention to systemic rupture.

3.2 Data Collection and Triangulation

Given the fragmentary nature of the local historical record, the study relies on methodological triangulation to ensure validity across heterogeneous sources. As Tuesta (2005, pp. 14–15) reports, most local newspapers and magazines documenting Pucallpa's mobilization were lost in fires during the 1980s or discarded in the 1990s. To compensate for this archival void, three complementary data streams were employed:

1. **Documentary analysis** – systematic review of official records, decrees, press coverage, and union or civic-organization documents.

2. **Audiovisual materials** – journalistic documentaries and video archives containing direct testimonies from social leaders, journalists, and officials.

3. **Oral history and interviews** – fieldwork interviews with union leaders, political authorities, and journalists, providing insight into internal dynamics and contested interpretations absent from formal archives.

The interview material reveals multiple and sometimes conflicting perspectives on the events. These divergences are treated not as inconsistencies but as part of the social construction of the episode itself. Their analytical implications are examined in Section 4, where the heterogeneity of testimonies becomes central evidence for tracing the emergent and uncoordinated character of the Pucallpazo mobilization.

3.3 Analytical Procedure: Diagnosing a Critical Juncture

The empirical analysis follows a structured diagnostic sequence mirroring the theoretical framework:

1. **Establishing the cleavage** (4.1): trace the long-term center–periphery divide.

2. **Analyzing mobilization** (4.2–4.3): reconstruct the protest cycles of 1978–1981.

3. **Testing gradual mechanisms** (4.4): compare evidence to Streeck & Thelen's five modes of gradual transformation.

4. **Evaluating rupture** (4.5): apply Hogan's SSE criteria to determine whether the creation of the Department of Ucayali constituted an institutional rupture.

This sequence functions as a falsification test: if any gradual-change mechanism plausibly accounts for the process, the rupture hypothesis is rejected; if none do and the SSE conditions hold, a bottom-up critical juncture is confirmed.

3.4 Methodological Constraints and Ethical Considerations

Evidence is incomplete and uneven. Triangulation mitigates these limitations, and cross-checking oral testimonies against contemporaneous documents reduces memory bias. Each account is contextualized within its institutional role and historical moment to avoid over-reliance on retrospective interpretation.

All interviews were handled with ethical sensitivity and confidentiality, recognizing participants' right to interpret their own histories. Contradictions among sources are

approached as indicators of political contestation—an intrinsic feature of the Pucallpazo's democratizing process.

By combining process tracing with a triangulated, multi-source evidence base, this research reconstructs how a peripheral protest evolved into a potential institutional rupture. The next section applies this design to trace the historical antecedents of the center–periphery cleavage that made the Pucallpazo possible.

4 Empirical Analysis: The Pucallpazo and the Activation of the Center–Periphery Cleavage

This section applies the diagnostic framework developed earlier to the Peruvian case, tracing how long-standing structural dependence evolved into an episode of collective mobilization and institutional rupture. The analysis proceeds sequentially—from the historical formation of the cleavage to its activation, escalation, and resolution—culminating in a systematic test of whether the Pucallpazo represents a gradual adaptation or a bottom-up critical juncture.

4.1 Historical Antecedents and the Long Arc of Peripheral Dependence

The 1978 Pucallpazo was not an isolated outburst but the culmination of a long-simmering distributional conflict rooted in Pucallpa's subordination within the Department of Loreto. This enduring center–periphery cleavage—established between the creation of the Province of Coronel Portillo in 1943 and the late 1970s—was institutionalized through administrative neglect, fiscal extraction, and a fragmented jurisdictional system that systematically disadvantaged Pucallpa while concentrating power and resources in Iquitos. Three dimensions defined this latent tension: (i) rapid urban growth without commensurate authority, (ii) entrenched political and infrastructural subordination, and (iii) the emergence of a civic coalition demanding institutional change.

4.1.1 Lopsided Development: Urban Growth amid Institutional Constraint

Pucallpa's transformation from a remote settlement into a commercial hub deepened its subordinate status. The completion of the Federico Basadre Highway in 1943, linking Pucallpa to Lima, redefined the city as a "commercial center of the first order" (Ortiz 1962, p. 202) and "the most important commercial city in the Peruvian Amazon" (Dourojeanni 1990, p. 95). The road catalyzed demographic expansion: by 1972, Pucallpa and Iquitos together concentrated 34 percent of Loreto's population and nearly 70 percent of its urban residents (San Román et al. 1994, p. 231). Hospitals, schools, an airstrip, and a volunteer fire brigade signaled modernization—but not autonomy.

Material progress contrasted sharply with limited administrative prerogatives. Rapid urbanization created complex demands for services and infrastructure that the city's provincial status could not meet.

> "There is no gasoline in Pucallpa, no tires, no car springs, and no spare parts. So we got together, we made an agreement, and we informed the sub-prefect of Pucallpa that we were giving the president of the republic 72 hours to listen to us and issue driver's licenses in Pucallpa."
>
> — Julio Flores, Driver's Union leader, interview, October 18, 2022

On the other hand, the population identified a lack of development opportunities:

> "I, for example, completed the fifth year of secondary school and I'm an automotive technician. There were other drivers who were also trained, but there came a time in 1957 (sic) when all the drivers got together—many of us, not all of course—and we said, 'Well, what are we going to do in Pucallpa if we don't have a university, if there's no technical institute, no teacher training institute, no electricity' (...) To study, our children had to go to Huánuco, to Iquitos, to Tingo María. And why couldn't we have a university here?"
>
> — Julio Flores, Driver's Union leader, interview, October 18, 2022

The stage was set for confrontation between economic vitality and political marginalization—a classic distributional conflict over resources and authority.

4.1.2 The Architecture of Dependence: Political and Infrastructural Subordination

Pucallpa's subordination was institutionalized through a fragmented system of governance. While administered from Iquitos, judicial matters fell under Huánuco, educational affairs under Huancayo, and the mayor of Coronel Portillo was often appointed directly by the central government in Lima. This bizarre arrangement ensured that decisions on budgets, public works, and policy were made remotely, crippling local self-determination and generating chronic inefficiencies.

Fiscal and infrastructural neglect mirrored this hierarchy. In 1981, Maynas (Iquitos) absorbed 43 percent of Loreto's public investment, while Coronel Portillo received barely 11.7 percent (Vivanco Pimentel and Benzaquén Rengifo 1997, p. 246). As one local leader recalled:

> "The largest percentage of the department's budget was absorbed by Iquitos... leaving almost nothing for our province."
>
> — Manuel Vásquez Valera, Teacher's Union leader, interview, April 21, 2022

Living conditions reinforced this sense of abandonment.

> "The electricity service operated only for a few hours and for a small sector of the city, with frequent blackouts that, when the power returned, burned appliances. Likewise, potable water service was available for only a few hours and to a small sector of the city. Sewer service practically did not exist, and the most common solution was the use of latrines."
>
> — Manuel Vásquez Valera, Teacher's Union leader, interview, April 21, 2022

Pucallpa had an airport that operated in precarious conditions, and the river port did not meet the city's growing commercial activity. These limitations were the subject of repeated public complaints:

> "Repeatedly the poor condition of the runway [at Pucallpa Airport] has been criticized. Recently, the residents of Pucallpa sent the president of the Republic a report requesting state intervention to solve this airport problem. [...] For some time now, the people of Pucallpa have been demanding an adequate dock for their river port, because the increasing commercial movement between Lima and Pucallpa and other towns in Ucayali and Amazonas required it."
>
> — Dionisio Ortiz (Ortiz 1962, pp. 1939–1940)

4.1.3 From Malcontent to Movement: The Emergence of a Civic Coalition

Amid this context, a loosely connected civic coalition began translating diffuse grievances into a coherent demand for territorial autonomy.

- **Media and Public Sphere**: Outlets such as *Rumbos Amazónicos* and Radio Pucallpa amplified calls for self-government, cultivating a regional identity distinct from Iquitos and Lima and framing departmental creation as the solution to institutionalized neglect.
- **Labor and Professional Unions**: The Drivers' Union—led by Carlos Pezo Sánchez and Julio Flores—mobilized around road conditions and fuel shortages. Alongside bank employees (FEB, STBN), teachers (SUTEP), and other guilds, they formed the backbone of organized protest. Their ability to secure funds for road paving in 1977 demonstrated the power of coordination.
- **Broader Civic Networks**: The Catholic Church, through Father Ángel Saboya Cachique, lent moral legitimacy. Business groups such as the Chamber of Commerce, frustrated by exclusion from regional decision-making, joined the cause. The

Septrionist[2] network—professionals, entrepreneurs, and politicians—drafted proposals for a new region with its capital in Pucallpa.

This coalition was emergent rather than orchestrated: independent actors with disparate agendas converged around a shared narrative of territorial injustice. The accumulated endogenous tensions of marginalization, extraction, and neglect had crystallized into an organized civic force. By 1978, the latent cleavage described by Hogan (2006) was primed for activation—ready to transform long-standing dependence into open contestation.

4.1.4 Sources and Analytical Implications

Local newspapers that chronicled these conflicts were destroyed in 1980s fires or discarded in the 1990s (2005). This reconstruction therefore relies on secondary histories, official reports, and oral testimonies collected in later decades. Despite fragmentation, these materials converge on a coherent portrait of structural exclusion.

This long arc of dependence establishes a crucial baseline for the diagnosis: the institutional relationship was characterized by stasis, not gradual change. Loreto's authority over Pucallpa was not slowly exhausting itself, drifting, or being subtly converted; it remained a resilient yet contested structure. This persistent stability underscores that the eventual rupture would be a decisive break from a durable institutional order, not its gradual evolution. The accumulated and unaddressed tensions over decades thus created the very conditions of significance that would define the coming change.

4.2 Mobilization Dynamics and the First Pucallpazo

As the previous section established, the structural conditions for rupture were in place. The 1978 Pucallpazo activated this center–periphery cleavage. What had long been a structural tension—between an economically vibrant yet politically subordinate province and a distant, extractive capital—suddenly crystallized into collective action. The trigger was modest but symbolically charged: chronic shortages of fuel and cooking gas that paralyzed transportation and commerce. Local organizations interpreted these shortages as evidence of systemic neglect by Loreto's authorities in Iquitos.

The protests that began as small, sectoral stoppages rapidly expanded. Drivers, bank employees, merchants, teachers, and students launched their own marches, yet no central authority coordinated the movement. Through local radio, personal networks, and ad hoc committees, disparate sectors synchronized within days. In the language of adaptive complex systems (Miller and Page 2007), this was an instance of emergent coor-

[2]The Septrionist Brotherhood (Hermandad Septrionista) is a mystic-esoteric community founded in the Peruvian Amazon. Its ideology blends elements of indigenous cosmovision, environmentalism, and spiritualism, and it has historically exerted social and cultural influence in the region, particularly among certain professional and intellectual circles. Its presence in the coalition added a unique cultural and moral dimension to the movement.

dination: local interactions generated city-wide organization without hierarchy. Small triggers—roadblocks, impromptu rallies—produced feedback loops that magnified participation.

4.2.1 Fragmented Coalitions and Emergent Coordination

Participant testimonies underscore the decentralized character of the mobilization. Each group saw itself as the movement's nucleus and downplayed others' roles—revealing, paradoxically, the absence of a single organizing center.

> "We were the first—the first attempt to unify several guilds, and as you can see, there was no drivers' union there at all."
>
> —Fernando Alfaro Venturo, former Secretary General, Bank of the Nation's Union (in Tapuyama, 2024)

Such contradictions exemplify what Hogan (2006) calls unexpected alignments—temporary convergences among actors who share no ideology but find joint purpose against entrenched authority. From an adaptive-systems perspective, these are traces of a self-organizing process in which heterogeneous actors generate coordination without central design.

4.2.2 Negotiating Restraint and Preserving Autonomy

Early coordination meetings revealed sharp tactical debates. Left-leaning activists proposed confrontational actions, while leaders of the Drivers' Union and local journalists insisted on a strictly civic and nonviolent protest.

> "The Drivers' Union did not practice any partisan politics... The leftists always sought sectarianism and violence... and Marino Ganoza Trevitazzo told them to their faces: you are reds[3], you seek blood, you are vampires."
>
> —Eulogio Medina Ortiz, former Secretary of Coordination for the Drivers' Union (in Tapuyama, 2024)

Of course, the other faction discredited these actors:

> "A journalist who appears as a leader of the first great Pucallpazo: Marino Ganoza Trevitazzo—a corrupt journalist, from the yellow press, who I think came fleeing from Lima, but someone brought him."
>
> —Fernando Alfaro Venturo, former Secretary General, Bank of the Nation's Union (in Tapuyama, 2024)

[3]"Rojos" (literally "reds") was a colloquial term in 1970s Peru used to denote members or sympathizers of left-wing, often communist, political movements.

This exchange reflected a deliberate effort to block external ideological influence and maintain autonomy from party agendas.

The Drivers' Union ultimately initiated the protest, calling a city-wide stoppage that other groups soon joined. The paralysis of Pucallpa was total but bloodless—a stark contrast to the violent demonstrations seen elsewhere in Peru during the 1970s. By privileging discipline and civic legitimacy over confrontation, organizers preserved broad public support and reinforced the image of the Pucallpazo as an authentically local, nonpartisan expression of collective will.

4.2.3 Political Parties and the Transitional Context

Although defense fronts and unions were not formally created or directed by political parties, partisan actors were present within the wider civic network. Comparative research shows that in subnational contexts with limited participation, parties often embed themselves—formally or informally—within civic networks (Kitschelt 2000; Levitsky and Cameron 2003). Their influence operates through personal ties and symbolic exchanges rather than organizational control.

In Pucallpa, this hybridization was clear. Journalists in *Rumbos Amazónicos* and *Sideral* were sympathetic to the Partido Aprista Peruano (APRA) (Matos Tuesta 2005, pp. 81–136). The Drivers' Union maintained links with Acción Popular, while teachers' and bank-workers' unions leaned toward Izquierda Unida (Tapuya Huaman 2024). Yet interviewees consistently emphasized territorial and civic identities over partisan ones, indicating that parties acted as allies, not organizers.

The Pucallpazo also unfolded within a national transition: the military regime of Morales Bermúdez was preparing to return power to civilians in 1980. This liberalization gave parties an incentive to seek electoral visibility through civic causes. Party involvement was thus opportunistic and symbiotic—politicians used the mobilization to re-enter public life, while civic leaders leveraged party support to amplify demands. Still, the initiative, framing, and mobilizing energy were rooted in local grievances, confirming that the activation of the cleavage was endogenous to the periphery rather than orchestrated from the center.

The mobilization's character—emergent, synchronized, and city-wide—defies the logic of incremental substitution. The shift in allegiance from Loreto to the cause of Ucayali was not a slow "defection" or "layering" but a sudden, collective break that manifested with overwhelming force in a matter of days. This explosive activation demonstrates the swiftness inherent in a ruptural process, where accumulated pressures bypass incremental channels and produce immediate, system-wide effects. The next phase would test how this civic rupture interacted with national politics and the state itself.

4.3 Negotiation and Resolution: From Protest to the Creation of Ucayali

Following the 1978 uprising, contention evolved through three distinct protest cycles between 1978 and 1981. Each deepened the rift with Iquitos and expanded the scope of demands. The first Pucallpazo demonstrated collective power; when initial negotiations stalled, subsequent waves intensified pressure for full departmental autonomy. By the second Pucallpazo (1979), a formal coordination committee—uniting labor unions, business associations, civic groups, and media actors—had coalesced around the unifying slogan "Ucayali para los ucayalinos," marking a clear shift from spontaneous protest to an organized institutional project.

The military government's response reflected its broader strategy of **managed retreat** in the face of mounting social unrest. While it initially deployed police forces to contain demonstrations, it refrained from large-scale repression—a notable contrast to its conduct during the *Limazo* (1975) (Panfichi 1983) or the National Strike of 1977 (Valladares Quijano 2014). Instead, General Morales Bermúdez's administration opted for political containment. In 1979, it issued **Supreme Decree No. 114-79-GRC**, which provisionally recognized Ucayali as a "Special Development Zone" with limited administrative autonomy but stopped short of granting full departmental status. This half-measure was a classic tactic of **deferral**: acknowledging the legitimacy of local grievances while postponing irreversible institutional change until after the scheduled democratic transition.

Local actors, however, refused to accept symbolic concessions. They framed their demands not only as a matter of developmental justice—highlighting decades of infrastructural neglect and fiscal extraction—but also as a democratic right to self-government in a moment when national debates on decentralization and constitutional reform were gaining momentum. While the national transition created a permissive context, the initiative, momentum, and strategic framing remained firmly rooted in Pucallpa's civic coalition. As interviewees consistently emphasized, parties and elites adjusted to a process already in motion; they did not orchestrate it.

The arrival of the civilian government under Fernando Belaúnde in July 1980 marked a turning point. With democratic legitimacy and a reformist image, the new administration inherited the unresolved Ucayali question. Rather than initiating a new policy, it acted as the **legitimizing executor** of a demand that had already irreversibly reshaped political reality on the ground. On June 20, 1981, **Law No. 23099** was enacted, formally creating the Department of Ucayali with Pucallpa as its capital. The law did not reinterpret or layer onto existing structures; it superseded Loreto's jurisdiction entirely, establishing a new co-equal territorial unit within the Peruvian state.

The speed of this transformation—from first mobilization in 1978 to legal enactment in

mid-1981—was exceptional by Peruvian standards, where territorial reorganization has historically been slow, centralized, and elite-driven. The outcome was not a technical adjustment but a sovereign reconfiguration: it eliminated Pucallpa's subordinate status, redefined fiscal and administrative hierarchies, and redrew Peru's political map. In doing so, it produced an encompassing institutional rupture, automatically altering representation, resource flows, and governance across the Amazonian region and contributing to a broader state rescaling from below.

Critically, political careers emerged *after* the rupture, not before. Figures like Francisco Odicio Román (APRA-affiliated journalist, later dean of Ucayali's College of Journalists in 1982) and Manuel Vásquez Valera (teachers' union leader and Frente de Defensa secretary, twice elected mayor of Coronel Portillo under Izquierda Unida) leveraged the movement's success into political office. Their trajectories confirm that electoral capital followed mobilization, not the reverse—further evidence that the Pucallpazo was an endogenous, bottom-up process.

Thus, the creation of Ucayali was not the product of elite design, technocratic decentralization, or even national transition alone. It was the institutional crystallization of a subnational rupture, compelled by coordinated civic pressure and enabled—but not caused—by a central state in strategic retreat.

4.4 Testing Gradual Mechanisms: Why Incremental Explanations Fail

To assess whether this transformation fits gradualist models, the case is compared with Streeck and Thelen's (2005) five mechanisms of incremental change. None captures the Pucallpazo's speed or magnitude.

Each gradual mechanism presupposes change within an existing institutional framework. The Pucallpazo, by contrast, shattered that framework—a rupture from below that displaced the territorial order and compelled the state to adopt a new configuration.

4.5 Evaluating Rupture: Applying Hogan's SSE Criteria

Having ruled out gradualism, the final step tests whether the Pucallpazo meets Hogan's (2006) criteria for a critical juncture: significance, swiftness, and encompassing scope (SSE).

Significance The change redefined authority relations within the Peruvian state. By creating the Department of Ucayali, the episode elevated a subordinate province to co-equal status with its own budget, congressional representation, and autonomous policy capacity. This was not a mere administrative tweak but a reorganization of sovereignty—altering who held power and how resources flowed. It constituted a fundamental reconfiguration of the distributional order (Mahoney and K. A. Thelen 2010),

Table 1: Diagnostic Checklist: Testing Gradual-Change Mechanisms against the Pucallpazo

Mechanism	Core Logic of Change	Pucallpazo Evidence	Verdict
Layering	New rules are added atop existing institutions.	The demand was for replacement, not addition, culminating in a surgical separation, not a new layer (§4.2–4.3).	No fit
Conversion	Existing institutions are redirected to new goals.	The institutional framework was superseded, not reinterpreted; rules were rewritten, not repurposed (§4.1–4.3).	No fit
Drift	Change arises from neglect of adaptation.	Change was deliberate and organized, not passive; the framework was stable until directly challenged (§4.1–4.2).	No fit
Displacement	Slow rise of subordinate institutions through defection.	The shift in allegiance was a sudden, collective break, not a gradual transfer (§4.2).	No fit
Exhaustion	Gradual breakdown through self-undermining dynamics.	Loreto's authority was stable and entrenched, showing no internal decay prior to rupture (§4.1).	No fit

Source: author, based on empirical evidence from §§4.1–4.3.

permanently changing access to state resources and decision-making. For Pucallpa, it signified long-denied political recognition—a transformation of both structure and meaning. The rupture's significance is further confirmed by its enduring institutional legacies: the creation of the Universidad Nacional de Ucayali (1979) (*Decreto Ley 22804, 1979*; *Ley 23261, 1981*), the establishment of a regional EsSalud hospital network, and the constitutional consolidation of Ucayali's autonomy after the 1983 referendum.

Swiftness The transformation unfolded within a compressed three-year window (1978–1981). After decades of administrative stasis under Loreto, this rapid sequence: mobilization (1978), provisional recognition (1979), formal law (1981)—marked a clear temporal rupture. Accumulated tensions reached a threshold that precluded incremental resolution. The speed contrasts sharply with Peru's historically slow territorial reforms and underscores the non-linear tempo of critical junctures.

Encompassing Scope The effects extended far beyond Pucallpa. Ucayali's creation redrew Peru's territorial architecture, shifted inter-regional power balances, and restruc-

tured multiple domains simultaneously:

- **Fiscal**: Ucayali gained direct access to national budget allocations; by the 2000s, its per capita GDP had risen over 80% compared to 1990 (Mendoza et al. 2015, 34–38).
- **Administrative**: New provinces (Atalaya, Padre Abad, Purús) were created internally (*Law 23416, 1984*), demonstrating institutional maturation.
- **Educational**: A public university and later an intercultural university (UNIA) in 1999 institutionalized access to higher education for Amazonian youth.
- **Health**: A regional hospital network expanded care across all four provinces.
- **Symbolic**: A distinct "Ucayalino" identity emerged, displacing older affiliations with Loreto.

Even where outcomes remain incomplete—such as the long-stalled Puerto de Pucallpa—this does not negate the rupture. Rather, it shows that the Pucallpazo opened a permanent institutional field for negotiation, planning, and investment that did not exist before 1978. This systemic reconfiguration across fiscal, bureaucratic, educational, and political arenas confirms the encompassing nature of the change.

The evidence confirms the Pucallpazo as a **bottom-up critical juncture**. Endogenous tensions, long embedded in Peru's territorial order, were activated through emergent, self-organized mobilization, producing change that was significant, swift, and encompassing. Neither gradual adaptation nor top-down reform explains its scale, speed, or systemic impact. The Pucallpazo thus stands as a paradigmatic **self-organized rupture**—a moment when bottom-up democratization transcended incrementalism and **redrew the state itself**.

5 Diagnosing the Outcome: From Mobilization to Institutional Reconfiguration

This section interprets the empirical findings through the integrated framework developed earlier. It revisits the hypothesis that the Pucallpazo constituted a bottom-up critical juncture, reconstructs the causal mechanism that transformed long-standing endogenous tensions into institutional rupture, and situates the case within comparative debates on democratization from below. The goal is not only to confirm that the Pucallpazo meets Hogan's (2006) SSE criteria—significance, swiftness, and encompassing scope—but to show how its bottom-up, emergent logic distinguishes it from other, less transformative mobilizations in Latin America.

Table 2: Diagnostic Checklist: Applying Hogan's (2006) SSE Criteria to the Pucallpazo

Criterion	Definition	Pucallpazo Evidence	Verdict
Significance	Change redefines core authority relations.	Creation of a constitutionally recognized department with autonomous governance, budget, and representation; institutionalization of university, health, and provincial structures (§4.1–4.3; institutional legacies).	Confirmed
Swiftness	Change occurs within a compressed temporal window.	Mobilization (1978) → provisional recognition (1979) → Law No. 23099 (1981)—a decisive break after decades of stasis (§4.2–4.3).	Confirmed
Encompassing Scope	Change reshapes adjacent structures and systemic boundaries.	Redrawn territorial map; new fiscal flows; internal provincial reorganization; regional university and health systems; enduring identity shift (§4.3; institutional legacies).	Confirmed

Source: author, based on Hogan (2006) and empirical evidence from §§4.1–4.3.

5.1 Revisiting the Hypothesis

The empirical analysis confirms the study's working hypothesis: the Pucallpazo was a bottom-up critical juncture that redefined the Peruvian state's territorial architecture. Evidence presented in Section 4 demonstrates that all five gradual mechanisms of institutional change identified by Streeck and Thelen (2005)—layering, conversion, drift, displacement, and exhaustion—fail to account for the event's pace, scope, and institutional outcome (Table 1). None of them captures the abrupt substitution of one jurisdictional order for another.

Conversely, the Pucallpazo satisfies Hogan's (2006) three diagnostic criteria for discontinuous rupture (Table 2): it was significant, transforming authority relations between the state and the periphery; swift, occurring within a compressed three-year window; and encompassing, reorganizing multiple institutional domains simultaneously. The cumulative evidence demonstrates that the Pucallpazo cannot be understood as adaptive reform or elite-led decentralization. It was a self-organized rupture, endogenous to subnational actors, that forced the Peruvian state to redraw its own territorial boundaries.

This finding invites a closer look at how such an endogenous rupture unfolded—the mechanism through which structural dependence translated into systemic change.

This diagnosis is not merely classificatory. It reveals a rare pathway of institutional transformation: one in which long-accumulated structural tensions are activated not by external shock or elite design, but by emergent civic mobilization that overwhelms the state's capacity for incremental absorption.

5.2 Mechanisms of Rupture: From Endogenous Tension to Systemic Change

To explain how structural dependence evolved into institutional rupture, this section outlines a three-stage mechanism linking endogenous tension to systemic reconfiguration.

Table 3: Mechanisms of Bottom-Up Rupture

Stage	Mechanism	Description	Theoretical Link
Accumulation of Endogenous Tension	Structural exclusion within a rigid institutional framework	Decades of administrative subordination and fiscal extraction entrenched the center–periphery divide, generating latent conflict between Pucallpa and Iquitos (§4.1).	Mahoney & Thelen (2010): institutions as distributional orders requiring continuous political reinforcement.
Activation through Emergent Mobilization	Self-organization of local actors around shared grievances	Civic, labor, and media networks synchronized collective action, resisting partisan capture and mobilizing across sectors (§4.2).	Hogan (2006): activation of a latent cleavage; Miller & Page (2007): emergent coordination through local interaction.
Institutional Rupture and Reconfiguration	Overload of the state's adaptive capacity	Sustained mobilization overwhelmed Loreto's institutional equilibrium, compelling rapid negotiation and the legal creation of a new department (§§4.3–4.5).	Hogan (2006): rupture marked by significant, swift, and encompassing change resulting from a failure of institutional absorption.

Source: Author's synthesis, based on Hogan (2006), Mahoney & Thelen (2010), and Miller & Page (2007).

Critically, this mechanism does not rely on exogenous shocks or elite agency. Instead, it reveals how peripheral actors, operating without central leadership, can generate nonlinear systemic effects that reconfigure the state from below. The Pucallpazo thus operationalizes Hogan's (2006) notion of a "remoulded critical juncture"—not as a moment

of external disruption, but as an endogenous reordering triggered when latent cleavages intersect with self-organizing civic energy.

This causal logic challenges both top-down democratization narratives and gradualist institutionalism, offering a micro-foundational account of rupture that is especially relevant for understanding state transformation in contexts of territorial inequality and political marginalization.

5.3 Comparing Bottom-Up and Top-Down Pathways

5.3.1 Situating the Pucallpazo in Comparative Perspective

In most theories of democratization, change originates from above—through elite pacts, exogenous shocks, or deliberate reforms (Huntington 2002; O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986). Subnational mobilizations are often treated as secondary or derivative. Yet recent studies show that local movements can generate autonomous democratizing dynamics, reshaping institutions from the margins inward.

Within this landscape, the Pucallpazo stands apart. It was not a consequence of the 1980 democratic transition but a subnational antecedent that unfolded alongside and interacted with Peru's national political unraveling. While the military regime under Morales Bermúdez created a permissive environment by announcing its retreat from power, it also actively managed the Pucallpazo through tactical deferral: issuing a provisional recognition of Ucayali in 1979 while postponing full departmental status to its civilian successors. This was not co-optation in the classic sense, nor was it repression—but a calculated concession designed to stabilize the transition without legitimizing rupture under military rule.

Crucially, the mobilization's origin, energy, and institutional framing remained rooted in Pucallpa's civic coalition. National actors—parties, military leaders, and later the Belaúnde administration—reacted to, rather than directed, the process. The democratic opening thus functioned not as the cause of change, but as an enabling condition that lowered the cost of concession for a weakened state. In this sense, the Pucallpazo exemplifies how bottom-up ruptures can exploit, but not depend on, moments of central-state fragility.

5.3.2 Comparative Evidence: Varieties of Bottom-Up Change

To situate the Pucallpazo within broader debates, this subsection compares it with other cases of subnational or popular mobilization that pursued institutional change under varying conditions of state involvement. Comparative evidence across Latin America and beyond demonstrates that not all bottom-up mobilizations democratize or achieve institutional transformation. They vary in origin, mechanism, and institutional effect.

- **Designed participation from above**: Rebecca Abers (2000) examines participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre as a reform driven by a progressive local government. While participatory, the process was top-down in logic: the institutional design, rules, and scope were defined by the state. Change unfolded sequentially and cumulatively, reflecting gradual adaptation rather than rupture.

- **Hybrid transformations**: Nancy Postero (2017) documents how Bolivia's Estado Plurinacional emerged from bottom-up indigenous mobilization but was later recentralized under the MAS government. The process combined grassroots origin with elite consolidation, producing a contingent but state-absorbed transformation.

- **Emergent self-organization from below**: Xóchitl Leyva Solano (2005) presents the Zapatista autonomy project as a non-state, bottom-up experiment in self–organization—durable yet operating outside state institutions. Eduardo Silva (2009) analyzes Argentina's 2001 crisis as spawning temporary networks of self-management that reconfigured social relations but lacked institutional continuity. Sebastián Somma and Nicolás Donoso (2022) describe Chile's 2019 uprising as a contingent, decentralized mobilization that opened a constitutional process but failed to produce lasting reform.

Table 4: Typology of Institutional-Change Pathways

Logic of Change	Typical Drivers	Process Features	Representative Cases	Institutional Outcome
Top-Down Sequential	State elites, reformist governments	Planned, rule-bound, incremental	Abers (2000); Lust-Okar (2005)	Controlled participation within stable institutional design
Hybrid / Mixed	Grassroots → state incorporation	Early mobilization later institutionalized from above	Postero (2017); Stroschein (2012)	Partial transformation; re-centralization of authority
Bottom-Up Emergent (Non-Critical)	Local civic networks	Spontaneous, contingent, often temporary	Leyva Solano (2005); Silva (2009); Somma & Donoso (2022)	Expanded participation, limited institutionalization
Bottom-Up Critical-Ruptural	Civic coalitions compelling state redesign	Emergent, self-organized, systemic	Pucallpazo (Peru 1978–81)	Enduring reconfiguration of state structure and authority

Source: Author's synthesis based on Abers (2000); Postero (2017); Leyva Solano (2005); Silva (2009); Somma & Donoso (2022); and this study.

Across these cases, the pattern is consistent: mobilization is a necessary but insufficient condition for democratization. Many bottom-up movements generate participation and visibility yet fail to produce institutional transformation. A critical juncture occurs only when collective action crosses the threshold of reconfiguration—altering authority relations and formal rules.

The Pucallpazo exemplifies this rarer form: an emergent yet successful bottom-up rupture that achieved state restructuring. Unlike participatory designs (Abers 2000) or hybrid consolidations (Postero 2017), it compelled the Peruvian state to redraw its own territorial boundaries. And unlike self-organized movements that remained extra-institutional (Leyva Solano 2005; Silva 2009; Somma and Donoso 2022), it produced a legally recognized, enduring institutional outcome.

In this sense, the Pucallpazo bridges two traditions—it shares the spontaneity and civic energy of emergent mobilizations but culminates in a formal redistribution of sovereignty.

Notably, within Peru itself, no comparable subnational movement in the country's history has succeeded in compelling the state to redraw its territorial map. This absence of successful analogues is not a methodological limitation but a substantive finding that validates the proposed mechanisms of self-organized rupture. While grievances over centralism were widespread, other movements failed to assemble the specific combination of factors that enabled the Pucallpazo to cross the threshold from protest to reconfiguration.

The contrast with contemporary movements is illustrative. During the same period, a successful campaign led to the creation of the University of San Martín in Tarapoto (Oficina de Imagen 2016). This achievement, however, operated through layering—adding a new institution within the existing jurisdictional order without challenging the underlying distribution of territorial authority. Furthermore, while other Amazonian cities may have harbored aspirations for departmental status, no sustained, large-scale mobilization for this purpose is documented. Any nascent demands appear to have been absorbed or displaced by national political parties or fragmented local interests (Martinez-Vazquez and Vaillancourt 2025), preventing the emergence of a unified challenge to the territorial status quo.

One facilitating condition in Pucallpa's favor was the enormous size of the Department of Loreto, which was larger than many other departments combined. However, this structural factor alone was insufficient; it merely heightened the stakes of the distributional conflict. The Pucallpazo's unique success ultimately underscores that durable institutional reconfiguration requires a potent alignment of the specific conditions this study has diagnosed: a cross-sectoral coalition broad enough to overwhelm sectoral or partisan capture; a strategy of strategic nonviolence that maintains civic legitimacy under pressure; and the effective juridical translation of protest into a legible demand for sovereign reorganization. The fact that this combination crystallized only in Pucallpa highlights the high threshold for a bottom-up critical juncture and confirms its status as

the paradigmatic case in modern Peruvian history of a subnational mobilization directly forcing the creation of a new department.

5.4 Broader Implications for Subnational Democratization

The comparative synthesis highlights three broader implications for understanding democratization and state power in Latin America.

1. **Agency of the Periphery**: Peripheral regions are not passive recipients of national reform. The Pucallpazo demonstrates that subnational actors can be producers of institutional innovation, generating democratizing impulses from below. The creation of Ucayali reinserted historically marginalized citizens into state decision-making, institutionalizing their political presence.

2. **State Rescaling from Below**: The Peruvian case reveals that state rescaling can result from civic pressure, not just technocratic decentralization. Bottom-up mobilization forced the central state to redefine its own territorial boundaries, showing that decentralization can emerge as a conflictual yet democratizing process rather than a bureaucratic reform.

3. **Conditions for Successful Bottom-Up Democratization**: Comparative evidence suggests that success requires a particular combination:

    - a deep structural cleavage concentrating tension;
    - a broad yet disciplined civic coalition maintaining cross-partisan unity;
    - a nonviolent, inclusive repertoire that sustains legitimacy while applying pressure.

Where these align—as in the Pucallpazo—emergent mobilization transcends expressive protest to produce constitutive institutional change. In doing so, the Pucallpazo provides a clear empirical benchmark for identifying when bottom-up contention moves beyond participation to produce lasting institutional redesign.

Section 5 consolidated the argument: the Pucallpazo represents a bottom-up critical juncture that transformed Peru's territorial order through emergent civic mobilization. By contrasting it with other Latin American and comparative experiences, the analysis demonstrates that while bottom-up processes are widespread, few cross the threshold into institutional reconfiguration.

The Pucallpazo thus stands as a paradigmatic case of self-organized democratization, where local contention, rather than elite reform, became the driver of state transformation.

6 Synthesis and Conclusions

This study has examined the Pucallpazo (1978–1981) through the lens of institutional change, testing whether it represents a case of gradual adaptation or a bottom-up critical juncture. By combining insights from Mahoney and Thelen (2010), Streeck and Thelen (2005), and Hogan (2006), the analysis has shown how a long-standing center–periphery cleavage—rooted in distributional inequality and administrative dependence—was suddenly activated through emergent collective mobilization, producing a significant, swift, and encompassing (SSE) institutional rupture.

The argument unfolds in three dimensions. First, the Pucallpazo exemplifies how subnational contention can reach the threshold of institutional reconfiguration, challenging gradualist accounts that attribute change only to slow, negotiated adaptation. Second, it demonstrates that bottom-up democratization can generate not merely participation or protest, but a full reordering of the state's territorial authority. Finally, the case illustrates the theoretical and methodological payoffs of integrating process tracing with the logic of adaptive complex systems—revealing how micro-level coordination can yield macro-level transformation.

The empirical evidence of this work:

- Confirms the study's working hypothesis: the Pucallpazo was a bottom-up critical juncture that redefined the Peruvian state's territorial architecture (Section 4.1).
- Exemplifies a distinct pathway of institutional transformation: one in which long-standing structural tensions—accumulated over decades of center–periphery inequality—are not gradually managed or suppressed, but activated into systemic rupture through emergent, decentralized mobilization.
- Shows the process did not fit the logic of "differential growth" (layering) or "reinterpretation" (conversion), nor did it result from institutional neglect (drift) or exhaustion. Instead, collective mobilization shattered the existing shell of authority, forcing the creation of a new institutional core. This marks the empirical boundary where gradual adaptation yields to systemic discontinuity—the key distinction Hogan (2006) sought to formalize.

6.1 The Nature of Bottom-Up Democratization

The Pucallpazo demonstrates that bottom-up democratization is not synonymous with spontaneous protest or expanded participation. It can involve institutional creativity from below—moments when excluded actors compel the state to reconstruct its own boundaries.

Three causal mechanisms made the Pucallpa experience distinctive and were critical for translating mobilization into institutional rupture:

A. **Cross-sectoral coalition-building.** Civic, professional, religious, and business actors aligned around a territorial grievance, achieving breadth without ideological uniformity.

B. **Strategic nonviolence.** The Drivers' Union's insistence on a bloodless paralysis preserved legitimacy and enabled mass participation.

C. **Institutional translation.** Mobilization achieved juridical codification through Law No. 23099 (1981), transforming protest into a durable administrative reality.

Together, these mechanisms converted collective contention into systemic change, demonstrating that democratization from below can entail the redefinition of authority relations, not merely contestation within them.

6.2 Comparative Implications

Comparative analysis underscores the rarity of bottom-up processes that cross the threshold of reconfiguration. Across Latin America, similar mobilizations—such as participatory budgeting in Brazil (Abers 2000), the Bolivian plurinational reform (Postero 2017), the Zapatista autonomy (Leyva Solano 2005), or Argentina's post-crisis assemblies (Silva 2009)—expanded participation yet seldom redefined state sovereignty.

The Pucallpazo differs in that it compelled the state to redraw its own administrative and jurisdictional map, converting contentious politics into a formal reorganization of the state's territorial sovereignty. This shift—from contesting power within institutions to redefining the institutions themselves—is what marks it as a critical juncture rather than an episode of expanded participation.

6.3 Methodological Contributions

Methodologically, this study contributes to the intersection of process tracing, adaptive complex systems (ACS) theory, and hermeneutic interpretation. Each approach addressed a distinct challenge in reconstructing the Pucallpazo.

Process tracing provided the temporal scaffolding to identify causal sequences connecting mobilization and institutional change. ACS concepts illuminated how decentralized interactions among heterogeneous actors produced large-scale coordination without central control, revealing the self-organizing logic of bottom-up transformation.

Confronting a fragmentary and contested archive—where sources were destroyed, collections lost, and testimonies partial and politically inflected—the study adopted a hermeneutic approach inspired by Ricœur (2010; 2009). This treated inconsistencies and silences

not as flaws but as traces of plural memory and contested meaning. Through cross-reading divergent narratives, the analysis reconstructed the underlying structures of experience: exclusion, grievance, and moral claims to autonomy.

This hermeneutic triangulation complements causal process tracing. While process tracing reveals how events unfolded, hermeneutic interpretation recovers what they meant to historical actors. Combined, they yield a methodology that is both explanatory and interpretive—capable of reconstructing causal mechanisms and recovering the subjective meanings that animated them.

The study's broader methodological contribution thus lies in fusing causal reconstruction with interpretive depth, demonstrating that understanding a bottom-up critical juncture requires not only tracing its mechanisms but also reinterpreting its lived significance across fragmented historical memory.

6.4 Future Research: From Analog to Digital Mobilizations

The diagnostic framework developed in this study—falsifying gradual-change mechanisms before testing Hogan's SSE criteria—offers a replicable tool for assessing whether contemporary protest waves constitute critical junctures or remain confined to expressive politics. Recent decentralized, digitally mediated mobilizations provide ideal cases for applying this approach.

In Peru, the 2022–2023 protests against President Dina Boluarte generated rapid cross-regional coordination and anti-institutional discourse, with activists using Twitter to resist state-sponsored *terruqueo*—the stigmatization of dissent as terrorism (Rodriguez Bustamante 2024). Yet, despite viral framing and widespread repression (49 deaths), the movement achieved neither constitutional reform nor leadership turnover (Muñoz Acebes 2023). Similarly, Kenya's 2024 #RejectFinanceBill uprising leveraged TikTok's informal, emotionally charged language to build Gen Z solidarity and force parliamentary retreat (Khaemba et al. 2025). Both cases exhibit emergent coordination: decentralized leadership, real-time adaptation, and non-linear escalation.

However, neither crossed the threshold of institutional rupture. Outcomes—policy withdrawal in Kenya, heightened scrutiny in Peru—reflect **displacement** or **conversion** under duress: temporary shifts within existing state shells, constrained by misinformation, oversimplification, and demographic echo chambers (Khaemba et al. 2025; Rodriguez Bustamante 2024).

This pattern underscores a core lesson from the Pucallpazo: **emergent coordination is necessary but insufficient** for self-organized rupture. Success in 1978–1981 hinged on three elements largely absent in digital uprisings:

- a **focused, legible demand** (departmental creation);
- **cross-sectoral civic coalitions** grounded in local density; and

- **sustained strategic nonviolence** across protest cycles.

Future research should apply the SSE diagnostic to compare analog and digital pathways. Agent-Based Modeling (ABM) provides a particularly promising methodology for simulating how micro-interactions—whether in Pucallpa's union halls or contemporary digital platforms—scale into (or fail to produce) macro-institutional effects (Axtell 2000; Frank 2022; Magallanes Reyes 2025). By formalizing the mechanisms identified in this study—such as the emergence of cross-sectoral coordination from local interactions, the role of strategic nonviolence in maintaining coalition stability, and the translation of protest into institutional demands—ABM could systematically test the conditions under which self-organized rupture becomes possible.

Specifically, researchers could parameterize models to explore counterfactual scenarios: How does the presence or absence of a "focused, legible demand" affect the probability of institutional reconfiguration? To what extent do digital networks, despite their capacity for rapid dissemination, undermine the formation of the durable, cross-sectoral coalitions that proved decisive in Pucallpa? By simulating the bottom-up dynamics of institutional change, ABM would complement the hermeneutic and process-tracing approaches used here, offering a computational laboratory for developing and refining the theory of self-organized rupture.

The Pucallpazo thus endures not as a replicable blueprint, but as a **benchmark of institutional ambition**: proof that democratization from below demands not just voice, but the disciplined translation of contention into codified, systemic redesign.

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