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Book Review

Bolivarian Democracy from Five Perspectives

by
Daniel Hellinger

Luis Fernando Angosto-Ferrández *Venezuela Reframed: Indigenous Peoples and Socialisms of the Twenty-first Century*. London: Zed Books, 2015.

Dario Azzellini *Communes and Workers' Control in Venezuela: Building 21st-Century Socialism from Below*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016.

Raúl Gallegos *Crude Nation: How Oil Riches Ruined Venezuela.* Lincoln, NB: Potomac Books, 2016.

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt *How Democracies Die*. New York: Crown Publishing, 2018.

Ana L. Mallen and María Pilar García-Guadilla *Venezuela's Polarized Politics: The Paradox of Direct Democracy under Chávez*. Boulder: First Forum Press, 2017.

The books considered here provide a range of perspectives on Venezuela's experiments with participatory democracy, socialist "horizontal" relations of production, and investment in social programs. The most optimistic of these works, Azzellini's *Communes and Workers' Control in Venezuela*, despite his frequent acknowledgment of challenges and shortcomings, seems almost utopian in its description and analysis of Bolivarian experiments in twenty-first-century socialism. At the other extreme, Gallegos's *Crude Nation* is almost dystopian in its close-up view of everyday life in Venezuela, provoking despair that the country can ever dig itself out of its current crisis without surrendering to a neoliberal logic. The volumes by Mallen and García-Guadilla and by Angosto-Ferrández stand somewhere between these poles. In contrast to these four books, *How Democracies* Die, by Levitsky and Ziblatt, is focused not on Venezuela but on the dangers to democracy posed by the ascendancy of Donald Trump. However, it draws heavily on Venezuela and the legacy of Hugo Chávez to make its case, providing a quite common and much too casual portrait of the Bolivarian crisis.

POLARIZATION AND DIRECT DEMOCRACY

For Mallen and García-Guadilla's *Venezuela's Polarized Politics* the "paradox of direct democracy under Chávez" is that the exaltation of popular sovereignty over recognition of plural interests, movements, and organizational life "transformed Venezuelans into polarized subjects." While Chávez is accorded a significant quota of responsibility for this development, the authors' analytical lens is focused well beyond the question

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of leadership, and while their book will inevitably provoke disagreement in some quarters they do not present a deliberately hostile critique or scapegoat the Venezuelan president. They maintain that "the polarization of Venezuela's public sphere resulted from social interaction based on exclusion and inclusion" and from a "spatial balkanization of Venezuelan society" that preceded the Chávez era. The effective exclusion of opposition influence in the Asamblea Nacional Constituyente (National Constituent Assembly—ANC), because of the voting system used to populate it, was an early harbinger of polarization; so too was the opposition's intransigent attack on the Bolivarian regime, especially the 48-hour coup of April 2002 and the December shutdown of oil exports. The "paradox" at work was that while the ascent of Chávez was aided by two decades of popular organizing, "by adopting the discourse and the banner of Venezuela's social movements and organizations, the state set in motion a process of differentiation, forcing each social movement and organization to renegotiate its relationship with each other and the state." As a result, delegates to the ANC and later the National Assembly conceived themselves as representing the "will of the sovereign" rather than "the will of different class, social, economic, and political interests" (138–140).

Mallen and García-Guadilla insist that they have no intention of developing a universal theory of political polarization, mainly focusing on how the process unfolded in Venezuela. Nonetheless, their book can be considered a case study with applications beyond Venezuela and relevant to the Trumpian era in the United States. They contend that "the process of polarization requires that societies replace pragmatic politics, calculated risks, rational behavior, tolerance, and plurality" with an "existential struggle" (5) in which citizens adopt a Manichean view of each other's intentions. Social and economic inequality was not enough to generate this kind of politics, in which factions "interpreted life under Chávez in . . . disparate ways" (3). Their judgments about the responsibility of these factions are balanced but do not adopt a "pox on both your houses" approach. For example, they find Chávez's controversial style to have contributed to polarization but credit him with offering "exactly what the previous regime had denied Venezuela's population" by supporting "demands of regime change and participatory democracy" (7).

The authors see the April 2002 coup as the tipping point because of the opposition's rejection of constitutional means to resist Chávez's program and oust him from power. They devote a chapter to the far-reaching consequences of the media's complicity in the execution of the coup, substituting activism for reporting and accelerating the centrifugal forces already pushing the state media toward a similar orientation. They paint a portrait of Venezuelan politics as a kind of vortex in which groups that sought some autonomy from the main political actors found themselves pulled into the storm, as was the case in 2007 with the "dreams of unity" of the new student movement that attempted to build bridges across the political divide but allowed itself to be co-opted into the struggle. The polarization of Venezuelan politics extended into the world of academia, with intolerance and violence directed at one another on campus by supporters and opponents of the Bolivarian regime.

Mallen and García-Guadilla do not so much disregard class conflict as consider it alongside other factors that accentuated centrifugal social forces. That theme runs through their chapter about "political ghettos in Caracas." Caracas was spatially "balkanized" before Chávez, and market forces played a significant role in this regard, "physically relegating actors to specific geographical spaces: the well-to-do to the east and the poor to the west" (138). Although their book only touches briefly on the first two years of Maduro's administration, they recognize that the opposition continues to pay a price for its role in polarizing politics in the Chávez years. Its inability to attract more barrio residents to its ranks, they say, despite signs of discontent with Maduro's leadership and with economic privation can be attributed to the well-founded suspicion that an opposition government would terminate many of the programs from which the popular sectors benefit.

They argue that not only the Chavistas but also the opposition "disseminated the notion that increased citizen participation was a legitimate means of resolving conflict, and that the legitimacy of government authorities and programs hinged on political participation" (10). They contend that increased citizen participation, promoted, institutionalized, and funded by the national government, contributes to social polarization and an existential political struggle: "The Venezuela case demonstrates that the institutionalization of participatory democracy does not in and of itself result in a better or more efficient democratic regime" (139). Political mobilization and participation preceded Chávez's coming to power, but "when Chávez assumed power, he appropriated the goals of these organizations, and his political agenda promoted co-responsibility, co-government, and participatory democratic processes. . . . The differences that social movements had previously set aside in hopes of achieving common goals became points of contention between organizations within civil society" (140).

It is not clear to me, however, whether a conventional representative democracy was any less susceptible to the forces of polarization and tendencies of government and opposition to define their conflicts with one another as "existential." One can hardly say, for example, that Chile was any less polarized in the Allende years, and, while Allende could deliver a rousing political speech, he certainly did not adopt terms such as "squalid" to characterize the opposition. Was it the emphasis on participation and direct democracy that exacerbated conflict, or was it the Manichean terms in which Chavistas and the opposition waged their struggle with each other? Was it direct democracy or twenty-first-century socialism that posed a threat to the opposition and defined the conflict as "existential"?

Many on the left will not accept Mallen and García-Guadilla's argument that Chavismo failed to be sufficiently inclusive of the plural interests and organizations of Venezuelan society. This should not detract from their contribution in providing a book that serves as an antidote to the one-sided critiques of Chavismo and simplistic condemnations of populism widespread among political pundits and mainstream political scientists.

CONSTITUENT POWER, COMMUNAL COUNCILS, AND WORKERS' DEMOCRACY

Azzellini in *Communes and Workers' Control* and Angosto-Ferrández in *Venezuela Reframed* differ from Mallen and García-Gaudilla and from each other on the Venezuelan state's use of its material resources to encourage communal councils and other participatory institutions. Both argue that conceiving civil society as a sphere of human activity separate from the state is a liberal construct that fails to recognize the state's capacity to encourage and materially support emancipatory social movements. For Azzellini, despite the obstacles posed by political centralization, bureaucracy, concessions to the bourgeoisie, and the collapse of world oil prices in 2014, the "constituent power" of popular movements made great advances toward building twenty-first-century socialism and overcoming the conservative, countervailing force of "constituted power" (a state unable or unwilling to commit to worker control and self-governance). "The future socialist state and the communal state must submit to popular power, which in turn must replace the existing bourgeois civil society" (262, citing a similar pronouncement by Chávez in 2008). Under Chávez's guidance and leadership, Azzellini argues, the Venezuelan state actively facilitated the project that originally emerged from social movements, especially channeling of funds derived from oil exports into supporting the "missions" and experiments in cooperatives and comanaged and self-managed enterprises. This support, however, was undermined by resistance on the part of bureaucrats and politicians unwilling to

respect constituent power, but, he contends, constituent power will continue pressing to build the communal state and overcome the state–civil-society dichotomy.

The first third of *Communes and Workers' Control* is given over to theoretical considerations about twenty-first-century socialism and the thorny problem of identifying the working class that drives the transition to socialism. In some ways Venezuela, because its economy is so dependent upon an economic surplus generated by oil rents and not by productive forces, seems an ideal testing ground for the proposition that socialist revolution is no longer linked mainly to an industrial "working class." Although Venezuela has agrarian and industrial workers, the most important base of Chavismo has been the poor residents of the barrios, who are buildiing communal institutions on the basis of residence and popular local governance. The working class emerging out of this popular organization most closely resembles Virno's (2004) and Hardt and Negri's (2004) conception of the Multitude. Azzellini departs somewhat from these theorists in arguing that the Multitude, which is pluralistic, can offer a coherent project of socialism by asserting its constituent power as a "people." A good example, he says, is the Andean indigenous movements' idea of a plurinational state (22–23).

The basis for Azzellini's optimism is his extensive field research on worker control, cooperatives, and communal councils in Venezuela, most of it conducted between 2005 and 2015. While there are sociological studies that provide a global overview of Venezuelan attitudes toward participatory democracy and worker democracy (e.g., Díaz, 2009; Hellinger, 2011) and studies that combine survey research with anthropological fieldwork (e.g., Fernandes, 2010; García-Guadilla, 2004; 2011), it would be difficult to find any scholar who has researched in more depth and breadth the entire range of economic experiments undertaken in Bolivarian Venezuela—agrarian co-ops, comanagement, and self-management in industrial enterprises of very different sizes and community councils. Approximately 200 pages of *Communes and Workers' Control* contain accounts of the successes, failures, and struggles of ordinary Venezuelans to build a new society. While one can dispute his optimism about the prospects for the Bolivarian project and the factors that have brought its sustainability into question, it will be difficult to find in one volume a more comprehensive portrait of the most ambitious and radical experiments in the early twenty-first-century's first revolutionary state.

Azzellini identifies the central conflict in Venezuela as one between "workers and organized communities" and those who "want to follow the old model based on capitalism and its state" (280). To be sure, he acknowledges that some of the impulse for workers' control and communal governance has come from the Venezuelan state, but he also argues that state bureaucrats and party functionaries have significantly undermined advances in workers' control. (Angosto-Ferrández contests this interpretation to some extent.) While he points to the "rentier mentality" of workers as limiting progress toward the building of the communal state and horizontal relations of solidarity in worker-run and comanaged enterprises, he attributes more responsibility to state and party functionaries.

The evidence for indicting the state bureaucracy and functionaries of the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (United Socialist Party of Venezuela—PSUV) for the limits of the revolution is far less robust than conventional wisdom has it. We have few studies that closely examine the attitudes and perspectives of the various members of the PSUV, employees of government bureaucracies and the state oil company Petróleos de Venezuela charged with implementing the missions and endogenous development programs funded by the executive branch. One of the few such studies of the interaction between Venezuelans and these functionaries paints a complex portrait (Strønen, 2017), one characterized by successes and frustrations on both sides.

Much of the impulse from the state for the creation of a communal state and the provision of massive public expenditures for stimulating endogenous development was not driven by the same process of popular consultation and electoral victories that

characterized the 1999 ANC. Already by 2013 the dependence of constituent power on Chávez had become clear in the very narrow victory of Nicolás Maduro over the opposition candidate. Azzellini notes that while communal councils continued to be formed under Maduro, the "new collective business paradigms" (157) were faltering. What accounts for this? *Communes and Workers' Control* focuses mostly on the communal councils that have achieved some stable levels of participation and tangible improvements. We get a less extensive examination of the full universe of participatory experiments, including situations in which effective community councils have not taken root and the failed experiments in endogenous development that were widespread in Chávez's second term (2007–2012).

The rentier mentality is undeniably a restraint on progress toward a communal democracy, as Azzellini argues, but he gives little attention to its material basis—Venezuela's incorporation into the global capitalist system as an extractive economy. This provides the ground rent that gives "constituted power" in Venezuela the capital to invest in development projects, including one seeking to incentivize and institutionalize horizontal relations of production. In this respect, it remains a strategy of "sowing the oil." Even though the strategy of endogenous development is redistributive and rooted in worker control, it shares with structuralist (e.g., import substitution) and neoliberal strategies the goal of increasing the productivity of labor; as in the 1970s the project seems to have ended in failure and increased debt. To some degree the blame rests on the rent-seeking commercial and financial bourgeoisie and the hostility of imperialist powers, but aside from claims that "failed" or "faltering" endogenous development projects have provided a "learning experience" the book makes no real attempt to assess the sustainability of the projects. In his last chapter Azzellini says that the lesson is that a two-track policy—meaning harmonious cooperation between constituted power and constituent power—will not work unless constituent power takes full control of the state. Angosto-Ferrández challenges the idea that constituted power has failed Bolivarian innovation.

INDIGENOUS VENEZUELA AND CONSTITUTED POWER

The theme of the relationship between constituent power and constituted state power is taken up in a different arena of Bolivarian Venezuela in Angosto-Ferrández's *Venezuela Reframed: Indigenous Peoples and Socialisms of the Twenty-first Century*. The first notable feature of this book is that the colon in the title signals that the author wishes to treat indigenous peoples' experience with the Bolivarian project as a case study with broader implications than those relevant to identity politics. Angosto-Ferrández argues that the overall record of the Chavista era, though certainly not above criticism, refutes the critique that identifies the "alleged state-centric orientations of Bolivarianism as the ultimate cause of all—indeed of any—challenges that Venezuela faces." That neoliberal critics take such a position, he says, should not surprise us, but he finds this tendency as well among some "self-righteous" leftists who "consider the time ripe for a determined demolition of this 'bourgeois' state and a move towards a model that, here and now, would constitute a realistic solution to most socioeconomic problems" (xix–xx).

Using indigenous politics in Venezuela as a case study to theorize the relationship between civil society and the state might seem a rather risky proposition. According to the census of 2011, only 2.8 percent of the population is identified as indigenous. As Angosto-Ferrández points out, census definitions and measuring devices have a political edge everywhere. Although the Chávez government was sympathetic to obtaining to a more accurate count, methodological limitations probably resulted in the undercounting of Venezuelans identifying at least partly with one of the country's indigenous

peoples. He acknowledges that Venezuela might seem less fruitful ground for studying indigenous politics than Bolivia or Ecuador, where much larger indigenous populations have interacted with a state controlled by pink-tide governments. Furthermore, Venezuela's indigenous peoples are highly diverse linguistically and widely dispersed. Although some significant strides toward recognition and empowerment were made in the Punto Fijo era (1958–1998), at the outset of the Bolivarian era indigenous movements and organizations lacked coherence and political influence. But this is in part what makes the Venezuelan experience so interesting; as Angosto-Ferrández shows, indigenous peoples and politics would become influential not only in their own right but also on a national scale and attract attention even from the opposition. For example, demands made by the (small) indigenous delegation to the ANC of 1999 attracted little support and much criticism from the opposition, but by 2012 the latter had adopted a quite different stance. Henrique Capriles, Chavez's main opponent in the 2012 presidential election, openly embraced indigenous symbols and employed rhetoric citing positive myths about indigenous history, seeking not to leave the discursive value of indigenous resistance to colonialism to Chavismo alone.

Indigenous marginality in Venezuela receded with the election of Chávez and the convening of the ANC. The Bolivarian leader and his leftist allies opened space for indigenous participation and demands in the ANC, which served as a catalyst for indigenous political incorporation. One particularly important development was the transformation of the largest indigenous organization, the Consejo Nacional Indio de Venezuela (National Indian Council of Venezuela—CONIVE), from a moribund status into "an indispensable interlocutor" (73) for the fractious collection of first peoples. This development brought more unity among indigenous peoples living with diverse cultures and in different environments (e.g., urban, migratory, and rural) and reshaped the overall relationship between the indigenous movements and the political class.

Angosto-Ferrández sees a transactional relationship rather than a clientelist one between the awakened indigenous movement resulting from this process and the Bolivarian state and political class. Being one of the most marginalized and excluded of Venezuelan groups, Indian peoples were among those Venezuelans most likely to gain from the government's directing oil rents toward the popular sectors. Indigenous movements did not always achieve their goals to the fullest (nor were they always united behind a single program), but they embraced and benefited materially from various missions and socioeconomic programs of the Chávez era and gained cultural recognition and political influence without precedent in the post-Conquest centuries. Although they were guaranteed only three seats in the ANC (voted on not by indigenous peoples alone but by all eligible voters in the three regions in question), the national platform, along with representation in state and local legislative chambers, made the support of CONIVE and similar organizations a valuable political asset, one that came to be prized by the opposition as well.

Given the country's dependence on the extraction of oil, it should not surprise that there is significant resistance to territorial autonomy, including within Chavismo. Territorial recognition might seem to be an easy issue for the left, as its sympathies seem to be consistently on the side of defense of absolute sovereignty over land use, especially as this issue is linked to defense of the environment against the abuses of extractive capital. While the Bolivarian Constitution provided for a process to demarcate the boundaries of territories in which indigenous peoples would be granted a significant degree of cultural autonomy and political control over natural resources, the promised demarcation has moved slowly at best. With the advent of government-fostered communal councils and (later) communes, a different channel of influence emerged for indigenous peoples. Angosto-Ferrández sees some benefit in this development, since more than 1,000 communal councils were formed rapidly with the material aid of the

Ministry of Indigenous Peoples and also through bottom-up initiatives of the peoples themselves. He points out that many indigenous people in both rural and (especially) urban areas would not directly have benefited from programs targeted only at demarcated indigenous territories; they did benefit from the Bolivarian socioeconomic programs channeled through communal councils and (to a lesser degree) land reform. He argues that "a large part of the indigenous population has shown sustained support for the ongoing socioeconomic and political enfranchisement as a priority over certain notions of free determination" (such as territorial and political autonomy) (113).

Angosto-Ferrández characterizes the overall result of Bolivarian policies as "weak territorialization." This leaves unresolved several salient questions about left governments and extractivism. Accepting the need of left governments to rely on mining or especially (in the case of Venezuela) oil seems like a "poisoned chalice," he writes, but avoiding imminent global degradation and destruction "is only achievable with structural changes at a global level, and until these occur I consider it unethical to put the blame on those countries that are weak links in a global chain" (212–213). He also points out that some indigenous people have practiced small-scale, culturally and environmentally conscious mining, but he acknowledges that large global mining companies and illicit operations threaten these experiments. "There is nothing necessarily anti-capitalistic about the implementation of indigenous rights, including territorial rights" (229).

Angosto-Ferrández is somewhat ambiguous when it comes to what "civil society" means in the context of the Chavista era. On the one hand, he acknowledges that the idea of civil society carries unpacked baggage from liberal democratic theory, including the assumption that resources provided by the state to political allies in social movements are inherently co-optive and clientelist.[1] On the other hand, the very notion of distinguishing "constituted power" from "constituent power" seems imbedded in a distinctive view of power, one that, as does liberal discourse, distinguishes state power from that emanating from society. And while Azzellini might advocate replacing electoral democracy with the communal state, Angosto-Ferrández acknowledges that "it is (primarily and ultimately) electoral processes that have made pursuit of a transformative political process possible in Venezuela" (11).

Those looking for an illuminating and innovative approach to understanding not only indigenous politics but also the thorny issue of state interaction with civil society (a theme broached in the other books reviewed here) should seek out *Venezuela Reframed*. Among the issues and findings it includes are the uses of indigeneity in discursive politics, autonomy and clientelism in social movement politics, indigenous identity in urban areas, territorialization, and the limited sovereignty of the state—issues that are transcendent for indigenous movements not only throughout Latin America but also wherever "first nations" (to use the Canadian euphemism) exist and have undergone colonialism.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

In *How Oil Riches Ruined Venezuela*, Raúl Gallegos thinks he can explain why Venezuela is in economic trouble. Though Gallegos could not be farther removed ideologically from Azzellini, he too thinks that a rentier mentality is a seminal cause. However, while for Azzellini the rentier mentality helps explain why Venezuelans are not better socialists, for Gallegos it explains why they are not better capitalists. Upon arriving in Caracas, he judges the "scores of DirecTV antennas jutting from hot tin roofs in the barrios" emblematic of why Venezuelans never save money and are always in debt.[2] During the oil boom of the Chávez years, they "pretty much spent their money as quickly as they could on pretty much any consumer good" (5).

Gallegos is a risk analyst and a journalist and columnist covering Latin America for *Bloomberg View* and oil issues for Dow Jones and the *Wall Street Journal*. Given his background, one might expect little more than a polemical screed against Chávez., and certainly he offers little praise for the late Venezuelan president. However, his book, consisting largely of anecdotes about the absurdities of day-to-day life in a capitalist petrostate, casts a hypercritical gaze not only at the Chávez era but also at the oil boom years of Punto Fijo. The book abounds with anecdotes gathered from searching for private toilet paper stashes and waiting in lines at the gas pump, dining on *arepas* and sampling the menus of once luxurious hotels and restaurants, and visiting middle-class apartments in high-rises and units built for beneficiaries of Bolivarian housing programs. Cumulatively, Gallegos paints a picture of a society of rent seekers, of an economy in which banks are eight times more profitable than Goldman-Sachs and *bachequeros* (professional resellers of subsidized and price-controlled goods) may make up half of the customers waiting in line at state retail markets: "Venezuelans have equated entrepreneurship with importing goods they can resell at home with a generous markup" (6). Citing the Jungian psychologist and economist Axel Capriles, he contends that Venezuelans share a "psychology of abundance," thinking that "wealth does not need to be created, just tapped" (99). The Venezuelan lives portrayed by Gallegos rarely include those of the Bolivarian activists that populate the narratives of other books in this review, but he does highlight the rentier mentality that Azzellini thinks is an obstacle to communal and workers' democracy.

The assumption from both perspectives is that rent seeking is somehow intrinsically irrational, even immoral. An understanding of Venezuelan collective identity needs to incorporate more fully the deeply rooted sense that the country's national wealth is "collectively owned" and needs to be democratically administered. This is what has obstructed efforts by neoliberals in Venezuela to make rent seeking more individualist. Venezuelans overwhelmingly rejected a seductive promise (endorsed by Gallegos) by Manuel Rosales, the main opponent to Chávez in the 2006 election, to give each household its own "tap" into the oil rents in the form of its black debit card. This "solution" qualifies as neoliberal in its rejection of the idea that the state should abjure collective control over the extraordinary surplus generated by the nationally owned subsoil.

Gallegos cannot be accused of observing Venezuelan life only from the perspective of Caracas's wealthy east-side *urbanizaciones*. He has his Mephistopheles in Che, armed head of a *colectivo*, who in one chapter escorts him to a Chinese-built housing project and laments that its occupants see their new homes as entitlements, not something to be earned. Gallegos travels to a popular marketplace in the massive Petare barrio on the eastern edge of the Caracas valley to find out how hard it is to get toilet paper. The approach is anecdotal, but it is not journalism only from the perspective of the comfortable and relatively wealthy side of the valley.

I only grudgingly concede this merit to Gallegos, because throughout the book there is no hint of any real consciousness of his own privileges and rent seeking. For example, he describes how through currency speculation he secures the services of a well-connected Venezuelan economist to change money on the black market and secure scarce goods. He lives in a luxury hotel in Caracas, accesses toilet paper secured from the black market (beyond the reach of ordinary Venezuelans), eats fine meals at a fraction of their nominal price in bolivars. This is Venezuela's "crude" petro-economy, and while I do not entirely begrudge him his security and comforts, he could at least demonstrate some consciousness about his First World privileges. His journal may lack the literary quality of a Joseph Conrad novel, but it evokes the same moral ambiguity and hazards of a journey into the "heart of darkness." How is Gallegos's quest to maintain First World living conditions not rent seeking? How is it different from the people's tapping into the satellite dishes vital to their inclusion in global circuits of culture?

Gallegos does not simply chalk up Venezuela's economic problems to the "Dutch Disease" thesis, which suggests that commodity booms are inherently destructive. Nor does he seem to think that the generous terms offered to foreign oil companies by PDVSA executives during the *apertura petrolera* (oil opening) of the 1990s were in Venezuela's national interest. Nor is there anything inherently "neoliberal" in Gallegos's critique of Chávez's failure to anticipate the inevitability of an eventual fall in oil prices and set aside some of the rents obtained during the boom. Just as in the OPEC boom era (1974–1983), during much of the Chávez era rents far exceeded the absorptive capacity of the Venezuelan economy. As did President Carlos Andrés Pérez before him, when funds set up for his project were inadequate Chávez (and even more so Maduro) borrowed against future oil exports to maintain his political project—though that project was certainly more democratic and egalitarian than that of Pérez. As Gallegos and others have pointed out, despite planning to double production capacity, PDVSA was undercapitalized and saw production halved in the Chávez era. While ideologically toxic to those of sympathetic to the Bolivarian project, *Crude Nation* does help us understand how boom and bust times have been lived in the Venezuelan petrostate.

STEREOTYPING CHÁVEZ AND BOLIVARIANISM

As if there were not enough news and propaganda in the international media about Venezuela's becoming a "dictatorship," the presidency of Hugo Chávez has now become a favorite example of the notion that populist forces are responsible for the erosion of liberal democratic stability in the United States and Western Europe. The Levitsky and Ziblatt volume provides a prime example. The authors contend that "when populists win elections, they often assault democratic institutions. In Latin America, for example, of all fifteen presidents elected in Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela between 1990 and 2012, five were populist outsiders: Albert Fujimori, Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, Lucio Gutiérrez, and Rafael Correa. All five ended up weakening democratic institutions." All five, say the authors, "test positive on a litmus test for authoritarianism" (23).

Levitsky and Ziblatt make 22 direct references to Venezuela, 19 of them to Chávez. The late Venezuelan president makes his first appearance in three pages (3–6) of the introduction, where the authors acknowledge that the 1999 Constitution—though "single-handedly written by the *Chavistas*"— was democratic. Still, by their account, it was Chávez's populism that inspired the failed coup of April 2002, "allowing Chávez to claim for himself even greater democratic legitimacy." In 2003, they claim, Chávez took his first steps toward authoritarianism by delaying the calling of a recall election in response to a successful signature drive by the opposition until 2004, when rising oil prices allowed him to win. Signers of the petition were subsequently blacklisted, and Chávez moved to pack the country's judicial system. Although the opposition candidate in the 2006 election acknowledged that Chávez legitimately won the balloting, Levitsky and Ziblatt say that the results merely "allowed him [Chávez] to maintain a democratic veneer." Chávez afterwards grew more authoritarian, "closing a major television station, arresting or exiling opposition politicians, judges, and media figures on dubious charges, and eliminating presidential term limits." In 2012 he was reelected in a "contest [that] was free but not fair" as a result of his control over "much of the media and . . . the vast machinery of the government in its favor." After his death, current President Nicolás Maduro "won another questionable election" and "imprisoned a major opposition leader." The opposition rebounded with a sweeping victory in legislative elections only to be denied "when a new single-party constituent assembly usurped" its power in 2017.

This narrative fails to address how an elected president should respond to media that were not only critical but actively engaged in a plot to overthrow him. After the failed coup Chávez did not engage in the kind of wholesale persecution of political opponents employed by, for example, Erdoğan in Turkey. The narrative fails to acknowledge that, in contrast to the radical right populism of Trump, Orban, the AfD in Germany, Brexit supporters, et al., Chávez actually welcomed immigrants and created a mission to enfranchise hundreds of thousands of Colombian immigrants and their descendants. He promoted an alternative form of economic integration and directed significant portions of oil rents to various aid and development programs, even though many of his own supporters were not convinced he should do so. There is a case to be made for Chávez's being in effect a "democratic despot," especially in the post-2006 era; we have plenty of hagiographies on the left. What we have from Levitsky and Ziblatt is a narrative selectively or wrongly painting a portrait of Chávez to serve an argument not only against socialism but against progressive populism.

How Democracies Die is a book worth reading for all those concerned about the fate of liberal democracy in the United States in the Trump era or, more broadly, as a primer on the destabilization of liberal democracy that is under way throughout much of the world. Its thesis is not that the United States is in danger of outright dictatorship or twentieth-century fascism: "Democratic backsliding begins at the ballot box. This is how democracies now die. Blatant dictatorship—in the form of fascism, communism, or military rule—has disappeared across much of the world" (5). In essence, the authors apply the concept of the "hybrid state," which emerged in comparative politics in the aftermath of the Arab Spring to denote authoritarian rule masked by a thin democratic veneer, and argue that it is toward this unhappy outcome that the United States and other liberal democracies are headed if action is not taken in time to stop populist opportunists. Levitsky is among those who promoted the idea of the "hybrid state" in an earlier coauthored book (Levitsky and Way, 2010) on "competitive authoritarianism."

Levitsky and Ziblatt raise many of the right kinds of questions on the impact of neoliberal globalization, the roots of right-wing populism in the United States and Europe, and the growing crisis of representation and polarization in the United States. They make a passionate plea for addressing the widening social and economic inequalities in the liberal democratic world. Their book is aimed at a readership beyond the academic. It could serve as a good introduction for undergraduates of how to think comparatively about the state of democracy in the world. It would better serve this purpose if it did not fall into the now familiar pattern of blaming populism as the immediate danger to democratic rule.

WHAT ABOUT "THE OIL QUESTION"?

None of the books here fully addresses the oil question, which now takes the form of whether Venezuela should entirely reject extractivism as a basis for capitalizing development. Azzellini seems to think that PDVSA could function as a worker-run enterprise, but that leaves open the question whether an enterprise generating such extraordinary profits (rents) can be wholly left to control by its workers alone. Angosto-Ferrández is ambiguous on extractivism, but at least he recognizes that attention must be paid to Venezuela's nearly 100 years of experience with oil—specifically the challenge of articulating a democratic mode of production with the way in which Venezuela is incorporated into the global capitalist economy. Boom and bust are hardly novel in Venezuela. What good are the lessons learned from endogenous development (a term that had largely disappeared from Bolivarian discourse even before the collapse of oil prices in mid-2014) if the capital to implement them is more

or less squandered, no less so than in the era of "Saudi Venezuela" (1974–1983), when Carlos Andrés Pérez also tried to "sow the oil" (albeit in a very different project) in overnight transformation?

The Bolivarian Revolution is clearly in trouble. Estimates of the size of the Venezuelan diaspora range from 1.5 million people, according to the International Organization for Migration, to 2.5 million, a figure widely cited by the opposition and the international media. Oil production, the lifeblood of the economy, which in the Chávez years was planned to reach 6 million barrels per day, has instead fallen from 3 million barrels in the early 2000s to 1.5 million today. Photos of the stacks of bolivars needed to buy simple household items circulate on social media sites. Politically, though the Maduro government at this writing seems to have the upper hand over the disorganized opposition, the turnout in elections in the past two years and periodic demonstrations of discontent in regions that once were Chavista strongholds signal that many of "the people" have not been inspired by President Maduro's convocation of a new Constituent Assembly. But it cannot all be laid at Maduro's feet. Chávez directed much more of the boom's benefits to the popular sectors, but with respect to preparing for the predictable cyclical fall of oil prices and maintaining PDVSA's productive capacity he failed.

Communal councils could be effective institutions for democratizing how this commonly owned surplus is deployed for the welfare of barrios and farms, but the development of macroeconomic plans must recognize that an oil-exporting country is also an importing country. It has one dynamic sector on which to build—the oil industry. Today, even with prices in recovery, that industry is in tatters, heavily indebted and undercapitalized despite a full decade (2002–2014) of extraordinary rents. A worse scenario for a petrostate no longer takes the form of running out of oil; it takes the form of producing more oil and forgoing entirely the rents that permit the vital imports on which its population lives. The specter today is that this is the future not only of Venezuela's oil deposits but also of the other resources of its vast interior.

Fernando Coronil (1997), the author of *The Magical State*, recognized just before his untimely death (in 2011) that the economic project launched by Chávez was quite different from the state-capitalist model that Pérez undertook (1974–1978) during the OPEC boom. Still, he argued, it was a project being fueled economically by a "magical state" deploying massive fiscal resources to conjure up a transformative developmental project. Azzellini acknowledges that the petrostate cultivates a rentier mentality and reinforces centralized state power, but just how is it that the material reality underlying rentierism could be changed? Unless Venezuela were to simply stop extracting and exporting oil altogether, it is far from clear how one might overcome that problem. While Angosto-Ferrández might be criticized for vacillating on extractivism, I prefer to regard his excellent work on the indigenous experience in the Bolivarian era as a contribution to solving the puzzle of how to square twenty-first-century socialism with oil export dependence and answering the question whether an extractive strategy of capital accumulation will remain sustainable in a world that needs to address catastrophic climate change.

NOTES

1. In fact, he argues that García-Guadilla's work on movements makes this assumption. While it is true that her prolific research on barrio associations suggests that intense partisanship in such a highly polarized political context often disrupts bottom-up associational movements and that popular leaders come to put loyalty to the government and party above concerns of barrio residents, she does not regard civil society as a sphere of society separate from the state or reject the notion that movements and leaders that participate in state-funded and -supported programs are

necessarily co-opted. She does see a threat to the protagonism that was deeply imbedded in the Bolivarian Constitution of 1999 (see, for example, García-Guadilla, 2004; 2011).

2. Naomi Schiller (2018), in her study of community media, makes a similar point in noting disparaging assessments of some community activists of the popularity of soap operas among barrio residents.

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