

STEVE ELLNER and MIGUEL TINKER SALAS (eds.): *Venezuela: Hugo Chávez and the Decline of an "Exceptional Democracy."* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007.

It seems that populist leaders have become the major protagonists of Latin American political history not only in the twentieth century, but also during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Concepts and terminology associated with populism once again permeate the lexicon of the region's analysts, following the rise to power of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador. These politicians evoke the so-called "classic populism," identified mainly with Juan Domingo Perón's leadership in Argentina and the myth of Getúlio Vargas as the "father of the poor" in Brazil.

In the 1990s, it was fashionable to speak of presidents Carlos Menem in Argentina and Alberto Fujimori in Peru as representatives of "neo-populism." Nowadays, the terms "left-wing populism" or "radical populism" have taken over. The neo-populists of the 1990s tended to adopt economic policies that were favorable to the free market, as opposed to the "classic" populists who waved the banners of nationalizations and state interventionism, and used anti-imperialist rhetoric. Menem and Fujimori oriented their policies toward privatization and an alliance with financial organisms, whereas classic populism was characterized by its redistributive policies and defiance of the international financial system.

Like most populists, old and new, Hugo Chávez has polarized his country as well as the international scene. While his opponents tirelessly invest energy and money in order to demonize Chávez and his regime, his supporters at home and abroad are constantly working to glorify the achievements of Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution.

This collection of articles, edited by Ellner and Tinker Salas, is probably the best English-language introduction to the profound changes taking place in Venezuela in the past 10 years. While clearly sympathetic towards the current regime, both the editors and most of the contributors avoid falling into the trap of simply demonizing or glorifying the Chávez Phenomenon.

The volume comprises ten concise and well-written chapters, divided into five parts, the first of which is devoted to the historical and international background. The authors in this section challenge the prevailing thesis about the exceptional nature of post-1958 Venezuelan democracy, pointing to the deep social divisions and tensions below the surface, and the unresponsive nature of the political system in a country that, for several decades, was touted as a model democracy for Latin America. They single out, in particular, the deterioration of political conditions and the increasing social inequality of the 1980s and 1990s, prior to Chávez's rise to power. As Ellner, Tinker Salas, and Edgardo Lander

show, the growing social gaps were the result of declining oil prices and global processes that contributed to the pauperization of popular classes all over the continent. This became evident during the mass disturbances of February 1989, in opposition to neoliberal austerity measures, known as the Caracazo. Still, many members of the elite refused to recognize the need for profound change in social and economic policies. Neither the two military coup attempts in 1992 nor the wave of street protests changed their mentality.

Similar to the classic populist movements of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, once in power the Chavistas have not restricted their campaign to the economic and social spheres but have tried their best on the cultural front as well, reaffirming Venezuela's indigenous, African, and Latin American identities. In this context, they have also sought to challenge traditional historiography and reinterpret the country's past. Ellner and Tinker Salas convincingly present contemporary efforts to question the image of the Venezuelan people's passivity during the years 1830-1936.

The second part of the book is devoted to oil and economic policy. Here, authors Tinker Salas and Dick Parker take a careful look at the flexible role of oil companies, which accepted certain concessions to national interests while influencing the government in ways that ensured their profits, the consolidation of their political power, and U.S. recognition. Among the issues discussed here are foreign economic concerns and American policies, as well as the interests, political attitudes, and social values of the emerging middle and upper classes.

Tinker Salas emphasizes the dramatic changes that have taken place in oil policy since Chávez's election. Although it was formally nationalized in 1976, the oil industry continued to enjoy *de facto* independence and operate as a private corporation. It was only after 2001 that Chávez moved to ensure state control of the industry and use of its profits, in line with his social and economic policies. Also analyzed in this section is the policy change effected in Acción Democrática. The party, which had staunchly supported state intervention in the economy since the 1940s, propounded a neoliberal economic program under President Rafael Caldera (1994-1999). Popular reaction against the consequences of this economic program paved the way for Chávez and the quest for an alternative to neoliberalism.

Parts III and IV of the book are the most interesting. They deal with race, ethnicity, labor, social movements, and civil society. Ellner's chapter argues that the workers' movement has been far from passive in Chávez's rise and consolidation, to judge by the unprecedented support for union autonomy among rank and file members, an aim hard to achieve in Venezuela's highly polarized and tense political climate. Jesús María Herrera Salas challenges Venezuela's myth of racial democracy (the famous notion of "café con leche"), and demonstrates the continued prevalence of racism on the part of educated white/light-skinned

middle and upper classes towards the colored masses, who are often portrayed as uncontrolled rabble.

Cristóbal Valenica Ramírez focuses on the heterogeneous alliance assembled around Chávez. Contrary to the commonly accepted image of the Chavistas as uniformly poor, illiterate, and politically unsophisticated masses who are easily manipulated by the charismatic president, Valencia shows that the members of the *Círculos Bolivarianos* include skilled technicians, social workers, university students, and community organizers. María Pilar García-Gaudillia's chapter looks at the rise of various social actors who have tried to fill the vacuum left by the loss of autonomy and the discrediting of traditional political parties and other institutions. Unfortunately, as she rightly points out, the social organizations of both the opposition and the popular sectors "have locked themselves into alliances with political parties, however discredited and delegitimized" (p. 151). At times, organizations of civil society have attempted to play the role generally assigned to political parties, thus confusing their identity, while in other cases political actors have disguised themselves as nongovernmental organizations or foundations. The tense atmosphere has also encouraged various social organizations of the opposition to place their hopes in the military and stimulated undemocratic civilian-military alliances.

The book's fifth and last section is devoted to electoral politics, social change, and U.S. reactions. The most important argument here is put forward by Daniel Hellinger. Indeed, for many Latin Americans the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua raised the question of whether elections could serve as an instrument for profound social change. Chávez's victory in a series of elections has not only invigorated the Bolivarian Revolution, it has also encouraged the participation in electoral politics of various radical movements in Latin America.

As I was writing this review, news arrived of Chávez's defeat in the referendum to change the country's constitution (December 2007). The same observers who were surprised by the 1998 elections and refused to acknowledge the challenge posed to the neoliberal policies of previous governments were now quick to predict the imminent end of Chavismo. Alas, the champagne bottles will have to remain in their private cellars. The euphoria of some of Chávez's opponents was clearly premature. The Venezuelan leader enjoys wide popular support and is not likely to leave center-stage soon. And even when he is gone, post-Chávez Venezuela will be a different country from the one we knew when he first entered the *Palacio de Miraflores* ten years ago. The readers of this edited volume will surely understand why.