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REVIEW ARTICLE

After the boom: Petro-politics and the fate of revolution in Venezuela

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Matthew Wilde, *A blessing and a curse: Oil, politics, and morality in Venezuela*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023.

Mariya Ivancheva, *The alternative university*: *Lessons from Bolivarian Venezuela*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023.

It's hard to think of a political project over the last 25 years that has courted more controversy than Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution. A reaction to the collapse of global energy prices and the imposition of neoliberal austerity in the late 1980s and 1990s, the Bolivarian Revolution challenged the very notions of democracy and popular sovereignty in a country long hailed as one of Latin America's greatest success stories. Inseparable from the personality of its namesake—the Liberator of South America, Simón Bolívar—and the charismatic military officer, Hugo Chávez, who sought to restore the Liberator's ideals, the Bolivarian Revolution saw a dramatic expansion of social rights for historically marginalized segments of Venezuelan society. The redistribution of Venezuela's oil wealth earned Chávez stalwart support from the nation's urban and rural poor, just as it earned him the ire of Venezuela's traditional elites and the undying hostility of US empire. The success of Chávez's policies and subsequent efforts to overthrow his government led to an international solidarity movement, including the Hands Off Venezuela campaign and global contingents of the Bolivarian Circles—networks of activists tasked with defending the revolution. Alongside these networks came a parade of writers and intellectuals working to make sense of the revolution for global audiences and to provide the revolution with an ideological infrastructure. In many ways, the left-wing writing on the Bolivarian Revolution has mirrored the cycles of the petroleum economy and the ambitions of some commentators to become the revolution's "official thinkers." During the oil boom of the early 2000s, an avalanche of scholarly and journalistic articles cheered the revolution and its many achievements: Venezuela was hailed for having struck a powerful blow against neoliberal globalization and for discovering "the new model of socialism for the twenty-first century." However, the studies under review here come at the end of this boom cycle in a moment of revolutionary ebb when many observers are searching for answers as to what exactly went wrong.

In his study of the moral problematization of Venezuela's oil wealth, Matt Wilde points to

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one of the central contradictions of the Bolivarian Revolution: the tension between visions of a future beyond petroleum and the capture of oil rent to build political consent. Wilde gives readers a fascinating exploration of what he calls "the hybrid petrostate" and exigencies that led to the reproduction of the very structures of dependency that sparked the revolution in the first place. Wilde tells this story from a unique vantage point—the life histories of a family of working-class Chavista activists in the city of Valencia. His picture of barrio life differs markedly from that of other social scientists who often treat the dynamics in Venezuela's capital, Caracas, as if they typified the revolutionary process as a whole. As an anthropologist who works in rural Venezuela, I feel this selection bias acutely, and it is refreshing to see a study of an "ordinary site" that centers the spaces where most Venezuelans live and work. Valencia is home to roughly a quarter of Venezuela's industrial output, and its enterprises are integrated into the world market. But Wilde's careful ethnography shows that these industries are not generative of the type of growth that can free Venezuela from precarity or absorb the surplus labor created by uneven development in the twentieth century.

Wilde gives intimate glimpses into the anxieties of the revolution's beneficiaries and the disjuncture between the revolution's moral imperatives and what supporters must do to survive and better their situations. Building on "moral economy" frameworks in history and anthropology, Wilde underscores the centrality of ethics to economic processes, even in instances where their enactors may imagine otherwise. Drawing on Raymond Williams's concept of "structures of feeling," Wilde shows the ambivalences of oil rent as a form of wealth which promises a great deal yet delivers surprisingly little. One must admire Wilde's sensitivity to the literature on the Venezuelan petrostate and the respectful attention he pays to Venezuelan scholars who have written the synoptic studies that make it possible for nonnative ethnographers to rapidly get up to speed. *A blessing and a curse* does a solid job of teasing out the factors that shape barrio residents' "fragile aspirations" for social mobility and the pairing of these aspirations with an ideology that pledges to instill in them a new sense of solidarity. Wilde's informants are part of a family of erstwhile factory and construction workers (one of whom was fired for union organizing) who have now become owners of a taxi-van company. Ironically, it is the revolution that has allowed this family to accumulate wealth and, at least temporarily, to *de-proletarianize* itself.

Contrary to what is often imagined, Venezuela has a relatively large proletariat, where "proletariat" is defined as those who own no means of production and come to the market with only labor-power to sell. The household Wilde studies is part of Venezuela's vast "working class," whose labor is partially subsumed by capital but whose irregular wages are frequently bolstered by petty-commodity production or service provision. The household remains firmly "working class" in a spatial and cultural sense, but its new status as petty proprietors and the progressive improvements made to the family home unleash a torrent of contradictions in daily life. Wilde pays special attention to his informants' intrafamily dynamics and relations with neighbors as well as the frictions that emerge from their visible success. One can debate whether "kinship" is truly "the most significant" social institution in Venezuela (cf. p. 8), but one cannot dispute the high value Venezuelans place on family or that most believe obligations to kin supersede duties to any other collectivity, with the possible exception of the nation. Wilde also underscores that kinship functions as a moral ideal, which underpins a host of other narratives linking personal life projects to wider political horizons. Life projects are *political* projects and vice versa, and family serves as an idiom for "the good society."

Here one can readily see the influence of classic debates in British social anthropology on the analysis, including discussions of personhood and an ambition to holism. In a world where ethnographic studies specialize to the point of myopia and increasingly lose sight of

wider connections, Wilde's efforts to map the "social totality" are most welcome. One striking aspect of his analysis is the extent to which popular understandings of socialism are rooted in older moral economies. As I have observed in my own fieldwork, Venezuelans often regard socialism as a species of gift economy built on obligatory reciprocities that have sustained the poor for generations. This logic, which ideally unites both kin and neighbors, is also commonly applied to the petrostate, such that "socialism" becomes a plea for "solidarity" against the social fragmentation and individualism encouraged by neoliberal policies. Moreover, the moral imperatives that justify these ideals have a distinctly nonsecular genealogy.

Wilde's informants are closely tied to the Catholic Church, and Wilde astutely observes that the values they learned in Catholic worker organizations align easily with Chavista discourse, despite his informants' declarations that before the rise of Chávez, "the language of socialism didn't exist" (p. 33). Wilde identifies his informants' professed adherence to Che Guevara's vision of "the new man" as evidence of their inculcation with "class consciousness," but it is not always clear that "class" is the source of this revolutionary ethics. Discourses of "solidarity" or "working together to find solutions to problems" are social, but not intrinsically class discourses, and one can readily find such values deployed in contexts where class difference is actively downplayed, especially in settings informed by Catholic social doctrine. All the same, Wilde shows convincingly that the Bolivarian Revolution has promoted new forms of stratification and what I would call an "eerily Protestant ethic" among its "winners." According to Wilde's informants, it was individual consumptive choices—not structural advantages—that were to blame for persistent inequality, and they underscored "sacrifices" made to reach their new status, while ignoring that "the right to struggle" was not equally available to all. This bootstrapping element in the ideology of Wilde's informants was clearly enabled by revaluation of Venezuela's national currency. But measures undertaken to facilitate popular consumption and prevent capital flight in the wake of an opposition oil boycott also hurt domestic producers, such that increased public expenditure failed to create adequate employment for young barrio men. This boom of "nonproductive gains," thus, set the stage for an inevitable bust cycle, and Wilde's book ends with a story of dashed hopes that finds echoes in Mariya Ivancheva's study of Venezuela's socialist university system.

The alternative university is a meditation on the potential of radical education reform for societal transformation. The book aspires to offer "critical policy lessons" via an exploration of the long-standing tension between Venezuela's "experimental" and "autonomous" university systems—a divide that took on new meaning in the Chávez years. Ivancheva opens with an overview of the neoliberalization of global higher education before presenting a Bourdieuean analysis of its impact on Venezuela following the Academic Renovation movement of the mid-twentieth century. In the 1960s and 1970s, leftist students and faculty occupied university campuses across Venezuela, achieving official government recognition of their "autonomy"—a status that offered some protection from police violence and external intimidation. But, as Ivancheva shows, the irony of autonomy reforms won by the left in the twentieth century is that these same gains later turned into their opposite in the hands of the right. By the 1980s, as the mood of ferment subsided and social services were privatized, autonomy reforms allowed already elite universities to turn into bastions of privilege largely unaccountable to wider publics.

In Venezuela, the concept of "university autonomy" is closely linked with ideas of academic freedom and freedom of speech, and Ivancheva argues that Venezuelan conservatives effectively mobilized this hegemonic consensus on "freedom from the violence of the state"—to struggle against a political apparatus now partially in the hands of the left (p. 41). But her criticisms do not stop with "autonomy" as it was practiced in the old university system. The

leaders of the Bolivarian University, who hoped to offer an alternative education model, often came from the activist milieu of the Fourth Republic (1958–1998) and brought with them a host of assumptions learned from these struggles. The profile of Bolivarian University leaders is hardly surprising given Chavismo's relatively shallow roots in the left and the tendency of this anti-neoliberal nationalist current to draw on former Communist Party cadres as the revolution radicalized. Yet Ivancheva argues that despite their radical credentials, a preference for "traditional university" degrees and teaching on centralized campuses helped to concentrate power in the hands of "senior management" and hinder the spread of access.

The narrative depicts the trajectory of the Bolivarian University from an institution built on relatively egalitarian relations to one of increasing labor flexibilization and counterproductive hierarchies. However, Ivancheva stresses that this experiment should not be thrown on "the scrapheap of history" and that scholars should strive to derive lessons for the future. Some of these lessons include the need to avoid reliance on hostile external agents, to fight for space within existing institutions, and to recognize that education reform goes hand in hand with reform of the labor market. Ultimately, Ivancheva adopts a balanced stance toward socialist education, treating it neither as a panacea for all social ills nor as a dystopian "social engineering project," which produces universal mediocrity—as Venezuela's political opposition would have it.

At its best, *The alternative university* offers enticing glimpses into what higher education policy can be in a society whose political rules have been altered by mass action. Those expecting a detailed ethnography of the inner workings of the socialist university may be disappointed, since the book is more of a critical "think piece" than a highly textured account of everyday life in the classroom. Others may find fault with its tendency to treat "the state" as a monolith or with the author's political judgments, which occasionally verge on the uncharitable. For example, the book dismisses as "empty fearmongering" Chavista claims that the new university system could be shut down, arguing such rhetoric was cynically deployed by a "radical nobility" to protect its privileges (p. 40). This assertion falls somewhat flat, however, when one considers that the opposition presidential candidate Manuel Rosales campaigned on a platform of dismantling the social missions, including popular education. In this context, one could see why "red professors" would prioritize defense of the new university system over confrontation with "government insiders" who controlled the purse strings. Similar problems of interpretation also extend to the book's reading of the revolution itself.

Ivancheva's claim that Venezuelan socialism was "not copied from the developed world" (p. 1) must be tempered by awareness that Chávez's policies drew explicit inspiration from German Social Democracy, the Blairist "Third Way," and Soviet Marxism—to say nothing of Chávez's fondness for the Russian anarchist Petr Kropotkin and the French geographer Henri Lefebvre. Likewise, Ivancheva's assertion that "the Bolivarian process feeds on the unpaid or underpaid reproductive labor of women in poor communities" (p. 6) must be balanced by recognition that the revolution offered historic opportunities for women's political participation—a point cogently made by Rachel Elfenbein (2019)—and that women were brought into the public-sector labor force in record numbers. Exclusions and inequalities must be criticized, but declarations that the revolution "left the old structures untouched" (p. 45) are neither uniformly true nor especially helpful. Other scholars have shown how the Bolivarian Revolution altered Venezuela's media landscape (Samet 2019; Schiller 2018), housing (Martínez et al. 2010), land tenure (Lubbock 2020), and infrastructure (Kappeler 2017; Kingsbury 2017) in consequential ways. But at times *The alternative university* seems to demand "perfect horizontality"—or the abolition of all hierarchies—from the outset, as if inequalities deeply rooted in the division of labor could simply be done away with at a stroke.

Both ethnographies tacitly suggest that centralization of power was the seed of betrayal in the Bolivarian Revolution or the law of motion behind the decline of its "radical democratic potential." But we may want to be more skeptical about this argument. Eclecticism and expediency were leitmotifs of the Chávez years, and the absence of a strong class sociology in ruling-party discourse reflected the ad hoc nature of its ideology and practice. Wilde and Ivancheva both correctly point to circumventing obstacles or the building of parallel institutions, instead of head-on confrontation with the old regime, as a critical weakness of Chavismo. But the dynamics of this "dual-power situation" (and what its transcendence would entail) are never fully theorized in either case. Contrary to what Ivancheva insinuates, dual-power situations are *not* ones in which existing institutions "die a natural death," or in which those structures are "gradually replaced" (cf. p. 43). Rather, dual-power situations are characterized by unstable equilibrium and struggle between competing governmental institutions, which result in either a rupture and transfer of sovereignty or the crushing of the insurgent powers (cf. Lenin [1917] 1964; Poulantzas 1978). Such an unstable equilibrium cannot last for an indefinite period of time, and prolonged indecision can prove fatal to subaltern forces. Despite what is suggested, the Chavistas *did in fact hold* "the balance of power in the bourgeois state" (cf. p. 5), and for this reason, many observers refer to Chavismo as a "Bonapartist regime" built on class collaboration. Yet, instead of analyzing this corporatist compromise in rigorous class terms (or in terms of the institutions that could constitute a new sovereignty), both books tend to rely on topographical metaphors like "top-down" and "bottom-up" to analyze the revolutionary process—tropes which evade description of the actual social relations and that divorce capital from the state.

Pace what both ethnographies imply (perhaps inadvertently), states in the semi-periphery often function *as capital* in relation to labor due to their ownership and operation of industries. This is even more the case in a petrostate like Venezuela where the political-bureaucratic apparatus plays a primary role in organizing the labor process and material production, especially in newly created state enterprises. Conspicuously absent from both books, however, is a close analysis of the labor process and the class consciousness that arises, at least in part, from it. The labor process is a spectral presence in both books, arguably because it is a spectral presence in Venezuelan society at large, ruled, as it is, by the recirculation of oil rent. But Venezuelans do in fact work, and work's rhythms do influence culture and politics. There are tantalizing hints of this in both studies, such as when Ivancheva discusses the tension between the "traditional labor market" and expectations that Chavista students work as community organizers, or when Wilde analyses the "double burden" placed on women working in the household and the social missions. Both analyses point to real problems of statecraft in the semi-periphery (e.g., Bolivarian university graduates and barrio residents who cannot find jobs), but these observations of labor-absorption problems are not organically integrated with the political diagnoses, and the books stop short of explicating exactly *why* certain policy choices were made (e.g., Ivancheva, p. 134).

Structural conditions do indeed subvert and limit choices, but an explanation of why Chavismo failed to transform Venezuelan society must show how the Bolivarian Revolution's limitations intertwined with the ruling party's program and the subjectivity of its leading partisans. I would submit that the Chavista bloc lacked the political will and ideas to build a new form of sovereign power, as much as it lacked the objective means. Visions of socialism as "the self-emancipation of labor" had long ceased to circulate widely on the Global Left, and such a vision was neither in the immediate interests of Chavista officials nor in the economic interests of the bourgeois elites the Venezuelan government sought to placate. Some of the questions raised by these books are unanswerable, and trying to resolve them would amount to writ-

ing a counterfactual history. It is an open question whether Hugo Chávez was truly "forced" to make "strategic compromises" with business elites or if there were indeed viable alternatives (cf. Wilde, p. 17). The consequences of a more thoroughgoing rupture with capital would certainly have been severe, but one feels compelled to ask whether they would have been any worse than what Venezuela is currently experiencing with millions of its citizens outside the country in search of work and still more surviving on UN food aid.

Together, these two books go a long way to helping us understand the Venezuelan Thermidor and what became of a popular revolutionary movement that inspired so much hope but ultimately failed to realize its most vital objectives. In its early years, the Bolivarian Revolution was portrayed by supporters as "living proof" that socialism did not have to be a class-based project, grounded in a qualitatively new form of state. Socialist policies could be reconciled with liberal democratic institutions (e.g., Domínguez 1999; Gott 2005), and populist alignments of "the people" against "the oligarchy" provided sufficient leverage to create new forms of autonomy and wealth distribution, which constituted a meaningful transition away from capitalism (Ciccariello-Maher 2013). This analysis now lies in a pile of ashes. Future studies will have to ask hard questions about the political economy of socialism and whether some of the verdicts inherited from last century can any longer be upheld. Near the end of the 1980s, post-Marxist scholars disillusioned with the Soviet Union and the exhaustion of social democracy suggested the Left had to abandon its "one-sided focus" on the factory or site of production as the locus of social emancipation and "dethrone the working-class" as the privileged agent of change (Gorz [1980] 2001; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; cf. Forgacs 1985). "The proletariat" was *not* the subject of history, and "class" was not the central axis along which "radical democratic struggles" would or *should* unfold. In some measure, the defeat of the Bolivarian Revolution's radical aims can be laid at the feet of intellectuals who legitimized these ideas.

While it would be extremely uncharitable to suggest philosophers are responsible for the defeat of a process as complex and wide-ranging as the Bolivarian Revolution (and disrespectful to the countless activists who dedicated their lives to it), these thinkers nevertheless contributed to a profound ideological disorientation and misplaced faith in a pluralist social democracy that besieged nations like Venezuela can ill afford. Among the many failures of Chavismo must be included refusal to acknowledge the special status of labor as a practice *and* political subject along with productive labor's indispensable role in building an economy that could lessen the country's dependence on the world market. The laws of capitalism are unforgiving: they must either be obeyed or *consciously defied* in a fashion that substitutes the profit motive and competition with socially planned allocation. The Chavista movement won the war for popular opinion but lost the war for production. The unenviable task of the Bolivarian Revolution was to take a largely nonindustrial "working class" and link its labor in socialized enterprises with the institutions of political power. The Bolivarian Revolution did not overcome Venezuela's vulnerability because it did not produce the required ideological and material values. Chavista leaders declared they would transform society by instituting "new relations of production." By and large, they did not. Thus, the history captured in these two books stands as a stark warning to supporters of Latin America's "Second Pink Tide": find new ways to mobilize labor and the means of production—or perish.

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