

centuated by the worldwide economic crisis and the eventual restrictions of the war, temporarily revitalized the CCC. Members not only had to adjust to a new economic world; they had to confront, for the first time since the 1840s, criticism from a relatively free society, criticism that reached its peak during the 1945–48 democratic “revolution.” During the ten-year dictatorship that followed, their collective sigh of relief in these pages is almost audible, even though their role as exporters almost disappeared and that as importers was slowly undermined by increasing protection for nascent industries.

The last two chapters present a history of the changes brought about by the country’s return to democratic politics and the challenge of the entrepreneurial state. By this time, very few of the CCC’s leading members were simple merchants; most had diversified their interests. This created an identity problem for the CCC as these interests came into conflict. But as the petroleum boom of the 1970s turned into the lost decade of the 1980s and a generational change in leadership took place, the CCC began to find its role as the leading voice for what has come to be known as economic neoliberalism: privatization of state-owned businesses, the lifting of price and exchange controls, free (or freer) trade, and less state intervention in employer-employee relationships.

Based primarily on the remarkably comprehensive economic and commercial information in the CCC’s *Boletín* (published irregularly from 1894 to 1901 and monthly between 1919 and 1979), this study also had open access to archival material, such as minutes of meetings and the yearly assembly, reports, and correspondence. The book would have benefited from conscientious editing (it is increasingly repetitious toward the end and suffers at times from erratic punctuation). The index is not particularly useful. Not done by the author, it seems to have been computer generated. It fails to capture concepts, and it incessantly lists by author and title every citation in the text, the footnotes, and the bibliography.

Despite these minor faults, the book is a veritable marvel of information, analysis, and subtle criticism. It should be part of any collection with an interest in Latin America or business history.

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*Legitimación del poder y lucha política en Venezuela, 1936–1941.* By OSCAR BATTAGLINI. Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1993. Bibliography. 176 pp. Paper.

This book is the first account of the year 1936, when Venezuela allegedly entered the twentieth century. Its point of departure is what the author calls the Movimiento Popular (MP), the street protests and other mobilizations of nonprivileged sectors. Oscar Battaglini attempts to refute the view prevalent in much recent literature that President Eleazar López Contreras adroitly safeguarded the nation’s fledgling

democracy by keeping the virtually anarchistic MP under control with the necessary dosage of repressive measures.

Battaglini also takes issue with the opposite notion, formulated by fellow leftist writers who lament the Left's inability or unwillingness to exploit a prerevolutionary situation by questioning the López regime's legitimacy and eventually overthrowing it. Battaglini argues that seizing power in 1936 was out of the question, largely because the peasantry had not been incorporated in the struggle for radical change. He adds that the MP, and not the liberally autocratic López with his window dressing of reforms, was committed to deepening the democratic process.

Battaglini highlights the role of the oil workers as a vanguard of the MP and asserts that two-thirds of them came from urban areas. In making that assertion, he takes issue with the generally accepted view that they consisted mainly of ex-peasants. Had this been the case, he notes, the oil workers would have lacked the class consciousness and even the physical endurance (given the notoriously high levels of malnutrition in the countryside) to have engaged in such militant struggles.

Battaglini's work is a timely contribution to Venezuelan historiography, which in recent years has questioned the central role that formerly leftist political party leaders played in the founding and consolidation of the nation's democracy. Previously, political scientists commonly viewed parties as filling a void in civil society from the onset of the modern period, when democratic structures first made their appearance. By postulating the autonomy of the MP, Battaglini implicitly refutes the notion that the parties dominated civil society as they do today. As one example of the relativity of party control, Battaglini refers to the founding of the popular front-inspired Partido Democrático Nacional (PDN) in mid-1936, which unified the Left. According to Battaglini, true unity first emerged from the MP on the streets; only then was it decreed by party leaders at the organizational level in the form of the PDN.

Despite those points, the author fails to explore adequately the relationship between the parties and the MP. Indeed, Battaglini occasionally quotes the positions of leftist party leaders as representing those of the MP, thereby confusing readers as to the leadership of the popular movement. He claims that the MP, and organized labor in particular, largely retained its autonomy for the remainder of the 1930s and even throughout the 1940s; yet he provides no evidence for this assertion and never defines the term *autonomous*. Most of Battaglini's observations are derived from the press, including pro-leftist periodicals. New methodologies based on a bottom-up approach need to be employed to document further and to clarify the independent or symbiotic relationship between the parties and the MP that Battaglini postulates.

In sum, Battaglini's book serves as a corrective to the party focus that, until recently, predominated in the literature on the period; but his main thesis requires research strategies that go beyond elitist history.

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