

Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy

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Venezuela during the Chávez period (from 1998 to the present) provides rich insights that can inform conceptual understanding across a range of different scholarly disciplines. From social science to the liberal arts, from economics to international relations, the Bolivarian experience of radical change in economic, social, energy, and foreign policy challenges many contemporary assumptions and paradigms. Moreover, the experience of conflict and polarization that characterized the development and application of the Bolivarian process fundamentally transformed Venezuelan society and culture. Consequently the country is an interesting laboratory for exploring the impacts of major political upheaval on identities, loyalties, and values.

The Bolivarian Revolution may also provide helpful lessons for the international donor and development community. In 1999 Hugo Chávez inherited a country characterized by profound inequalities in the distribution of wealth, land, housing, education, employment, and security. His regime sought to reverse this through novel policy and organizational initiatives to distribute and redistribute public goods in favor of those located outside mainstream political and economic activity in the informal sector. Community participation, social capital development, stakeholder engagement, and gender mainstreaming were central elements of programs that were intended to recast citizenship and promote inclusion. These are all stressed in the donor and development literature, but they are rarely applied in practice. Venezuela provides a rare opportunity to study the implementation of such major projects of social transformation, their successes and failures in application, their impact on communities, and whether they reached their stated goals.

Opportunities Lost

Despite the contextual and conceptual importance of the Bolivarian Revolution, there is a marked reluctance to bring empirical depth to discussion and analysis of Venezuela during the Chávez period. Commentary in the media, academic, and policy circles has been polarized, disarmingly subjective, and narrowly focused on high politics. There are a number of factors that account for this, in particular the lack of quality analysis of the *popular* experience of the Bolivarian Revolution. Actually, more subtle and informed interpretations may be found in entertainment programming than news, as Acosta-Alzuru's chapter shows.

The Bolivarian process and Chávez's foreign policies challenged the fundamentals of liberal peace theory and its twin tenets of free markets and liberal democracy. As international initiatives to expand and consolidate this post-cold war vision were given fresh impetus by the events of September 11, 2001, Venezuela moved against the orthodoxy of policy. Located in a hemisphere dominated by the United States, this was a dramatic move, particularly as national and energy security moved to the forefront of U.S. strategic imperatives. The Chávez period was one of rupture, constant change, and displacement. Old elites and system beneficiaries were replaced by new actors and constituencies with different interests, identities, cultures, and priorities, and traditional lobby mechanisms were supplanted by new and typically informal networks of influence and access.

This context proved deleterious for meaningful engagement with, and qualitative analysis of, developments in the country. There was a marked reluctance within academic and policy circles to break with the analytical framework of liberal democracy. Venezuela's failure to conform to procedural benchmarks led to the swift categorization of the Bolivarian process and its initiatives as authoritarian (Diamond 2008; Dominguez and Jones 2007; Legler, Lean, and Boniface 2007; Ottaway 2003; Shifter 2007), in turn delegitimizing and discrediting the participatory initiatives and the validity of new social and organizational forms emerging in the country. Exploring Venezuela through the prism of authoritarianism also led to a disproportionate focus on high politics and state institutions even though these had effectively ceased to be the primary mechanisms for the articulation of interests, representation, and government oversight. But the assumption that the diminution of the competency and authority of these organs translated into the negation of all forms of bargaining, exchange, and accountability was fundamentally wrong. Politics in Venezuela had assumed new dimensions and dynamics, but these could not be captured through the authoritarian framework of analysis.

The tendency to negatively evaluate the Bolivarian process against the universal standards of liberal democracy was also reflected in the opinions of government officials, particularly in the United States (Reich 2005). These opinions reinforced and were reinforced by highly negative assessments of economic and political freedom in Venezuela produced by nongovernmental and quasi-governmental organizations, such as the National Endowment for Democracy, Freedom House, and Transparency International. These organizations created a cycle of opinion formation and information exchange among critics who were inadequately positioned to understand the drivers of the government's popularity because of the rigidity of their approaches and their failure to engage with the popular experience.

A consuming focus on the figure of President Chávez in the academic and policy literature further obscured the dynamics of change at the grassroots level, while marginalizing the complexity of the process of social change (Marcano and Barrera Tyszka 2007). Efforts to understand the Bolivarian process through the lens of populism and to squeeze the revolution into established analytical categories rarely engaged with the social and cultural changes set in motion or broke with the democracy-authoritarianism dichotomy (Reid 2007; Sylvia and Danopoulos 2003; Weyland 2003b), while the predominance of orthodox economists and a related focus on the economic determinants of voting behavior exacerbated the lack of engagement with the impacts of the Bolivarian Revolution on Venezuelan society (Penfold-Bencerra 2007; F. Rodríguez 2008; Weyland 2003a). With collective and individual actions reduced to economic transactions, the capacity to anticipate the future, understand the popular experience, and assess consequences was ameliorated. Econometric analysis of the rationality, fiscal or otherwise, of the missions, for example, provided no insight into the popular experience of participation in these projects, the type of associative experience they afforded, their role in building social capital, or their contribution to the legitimacy and popularity of the government.

Even within development organizations, there was a profound reluctance to examine the Venezuelan case, despite the fact that the administration designed and delivered a host of initiatives to help the poor. And so, for example, while USAID and the UK Department for International Development enthusiastically supported micro-credit schemes for the poor, mainstreaming of gender in anti-poverty initiatives, community empowerment, and stakeholder engagement in social-policy initiatives (all of which were central to the Bolivarian model), they saw the Venezuelan experience as irrelevant on the grounds that the country was unequal and not impoverished. The Bolivarian model of democracy was not regarded by the liberal, peace-oriented development community as

one that could be endorsed. Thus, opportunities to identify best practices, success, and constraints in devising transformative social projects in the context of institutional sclerosis and social deprivation were squandered or dismissed out of hand due to subjective biases that failed to disentangle Chávez the individual from the policies enacted.

As David Smilde notes in the introduction to this volume, the Bolivarian Revolution has received much attention in the international media. On the whole, this has cultivated negative impressions of the Bolivarian experience by maintaining a focus on Chávez and approaching governance in the country through the rubric of authoritarianism. An over-reliance on wire services and a failure to undertake investigative reporting and a strongly pro-opposition bias in sourcing, have served to marginalize popular views and experiences.

Ultimately, much of what has been written about Venezuela during the Bolivarian Revolution has not been based on “facts on the ground,” robust and rigorous analysis, or objective assessment of the Chávez government and its functioning. Instead, there has been a profusion of media articles, conference papers, think-tank reports, and political statements based on assumption and speculation, not interviews or fieldwork with relevant stakeholders or actors. These have served to shed darkness where there is a need for light, they have misled audiences, and in countries like the United States, Colombia, and the UK they have birthed counterproductive interventions.

The Need for New Approaches

This volume is important in four fundamental respects. First, it breaks with the notion that Venezuela should be analyzed or assessed as a liberal democracy. It defines Venezuela as a state-sponsored participatory democracy and as a result, it is positioned to explore new dimensions in debates on citizenship, civil society, and the meaning of democracy. Second, the book redresses the distortions and imbalances created by the traditional focus on liberal democracy, formal institutions, and high politics by addressing grassroots interests, communities, informal mechanisms, and public culture in line with its analytical focus on state-sponsored participatory democracy. These are all fundamental to an understanding of the multiple and complex changes that have occurred in Venezuela during the Chávez period. In particular, the volume breaks with the temptation to analyze participatory and mobilizational initiatives through formal organizations, such as political parties, interest groups, and trades unions. The contributions in the volume identify new trends, actors, and ten-

dencies, and in doing so they reveal a host of new organizational realities in the country. Third, the contributors support their assessments with empirical information and detailed fieldwork. The results are illuminating. They challenge many of the basic assumptions about social and political engagement in the country, in turn identifying possible future trajectories. The shift back to qualitative research in many of the chapters marks a welcome break from the purportedly logical assumptions of economists and from the crude, elite-focused moldings of the populist school. It grounds analysis in the popular experience and in doing so highlights the manifold challenges and opportunities faced by the Chávez government.

Following Venezuela's democratization in 1958, there was interest in the psephology and political culture of the country. But academic inquiry was incrementally hijacked by narrow institutionalist approaches that focused on formal structures and in particular on pacts and political parties. This detracted attention from the growing informal sphere of social, cultural, political, and economic life. Venezuelan academics were as culpable as their North American counterparts in neglecting the history and dynamics of the "other" Venezuela. It is only now, through efforts to understand the meaning, roots, and appeal of Chavismo through engagement with the informal, that the history of the marginalized majority is being researched and written. As demonstrated by the contributions to this volume, it is a rich and multilayered history that feeds into our understanding of contemporary reality, one that questions both the classification of Chavismo as an authoritarian project and depictions of Chávez as all powerful, unconstrained, and unaccountable. Instead, the analysis presented in these chapters points to a mesh of formal and informal constraints, limitations, and pressures that bind the administration and indicate elements of its fragility and vulnerability. The authors portray a dynamic, reflexive, and vibrant civil society, a participatory reality that counters the populist and econometric assumptions of an inarticulate and irrational mass. Herein lies the fourth significant advance made by this book. The chapters in this volume reintegrate the Bolivarian process back into the specific social, political, and cultural context of Venezuela's evolution. In addressing changes to popular culture, public discourse, and social identity, the chapters root assessment of transformation against the legacy of the illiberal Punto Fijo democracy. This makes it possible to gauge the scope, depth, and sustainability of the process and also to identify patterns of continuity with the *status quo ante*. This approach is infinitely more instructive and valuable than assessments predicated on illusory norms.

Lessons to Be Learned

This volume provides a number of important insights that merit wide dissemination so scholarship and commentary on Venezuela can progress from the current polarized stalemate and the perennial emphasis on benchmarks of democratic quality.

The first of these is the heterogeneity of Venezuelan society. In highlighting how participation, sentiment, and experience differ across communities, sectors, barrios, states, and regions, the chapters demonstrate the limitations of generic accounts and the importance of nuanced, focused, and context-specific analysis. Contemporary Venezuela emerges as a highly fluid and diverse polity, characterized by multiple and crosscutting cleavages, identities, and loyalties. Interrelated with this, each chapter presents a rich account of pluralism and tolerance. This cuts across crude pro- and anti-Chávez schemas, demonstrating a proliferation of values and opinions within what are otherwise perceived as static, homogenous, and conflicting camps. As demonstrated in Smilde's introduction and in particular the contributions by Daniel Hellinger and Alejandro Velasco, we find, for example, that among those who identify as *chavistas* there is a dynamic profusion of (sometimes antagonistic) ideologies and aspirations, which in turn points to the challenges the government faces in sustaining a broad-based alliance, responding to popular demands, and consolidating new participatory forms and representative mechanisms such as the PSUV (Partido Socialista Unico de Venezuela). Hellinger's analysis of political values further demonstrates the importance of grounded research. His findings confront established assumptions about the political opinions and perspectives of barrio residents. Hellinger's work and also the contribution by Kirk Hawkins, Guillermo Rosas, and Michael Johnson show barrio residents—who are typically portrayed as unwaveringly loyal to Chávez (and by default illiberal)—to be highly pluralist, diverse, and autonomous, with loyalties driven by a variety of factors. This research is all the more insightful when set against the backdrop of the PSUVs' defeat in large and politically important barrios such as Petare and Sucre in the regional elections of November 2008.

In comparison with the Punto Fijo period (1958–1998), associational life in Venezuela has undoubtedly been strengthened as a result of both the government's participatory initiatives and the context of conflict. The legitimacy of political participation, political engagement, and political institutions has been strengthened as well. As poll surveys demonstrate, Chávez himself remained remarkably popular through the end of 2009, a decade after assuming power; confidence in the National Assembly and politicians improved strongly after

the nadir of the 1980s and 1990s; and Venezuelans had a high level of confidence in democratic forms and their own democratic and electoral systems, as indicated by the Latinobarómetro surveys of 2006, 2007, and 2008.¹ This raises important questions as to the most appropriate analytical tools and benchmarks through which the Bolivarian process should be evaluated. The utility of measurements based on the procedural mechanisms of liberal democracy is clearly questionable, and as Hellinger's chapter on political attitudes in the *barrios* notes, so is the view that liberal democracy is a universally popular aspiration. Sections of Venezuelan society have repeatedly endorsed the Bolivarian vision of a participatory democracy based on horizontal linkages and with a strong social-welfare component. To dismiss Bolivarianism as authoritarian in this context is to deny plurality in democratic forms and also the legitimacy of endogenous democratic models.

Certainly it is the case that if Chávez's Venezuela is to be judged by the procedural benchmarks of liberal democracy, there is a deficit of checks and balances on government, the rule of law is weak, the military is not apolitical, and executive power is pronounced. But this leads to a number of related considerations. It has never been the case that liberal democracy was consolidated in Venezuela. During the *Punto Fijo* period, the country had a model of illiberal democracy that delimited participation, restricted access to power, privileged a minority, and politicized all state institutions. The rule of law was historically weak, and corruption and human rights abuses were pronounced. To present the Bolivarian process as some form of democratic regression or authoritarian aberration in this historical context is misleading. It denies the structural legacies of *Puntofijismo* and negates the progress that has been made in extending social and political inclusion in a historical context characterized by disaffection with political parties, politicians, and institutions.

The procedural mechanics of liberal democracy and the concept of contractual sovereignty are themselves characterized by manifold flaws in application and implementation, even in those countries that uphold themselves as the most advanced democracies in the world. Bolivarianism does not eschew liberal democratic mechanisms. For example, great stress has been placed on election processes, constitutionalism, and the legitimacy of formal institutions such as the National Assembly and the electoral administration. But the overriding objective has been to create a higher form of participatory democracy that engages all citizens on a routine and regular basis. Without understanding the aims and objectives of participatory democracy, it is difficult to engage with the initiatives developed and delivered by the government and to measure their success and legitimacy. More problematically, it is difficult to judge (and

criticize) Venezuela for its failure to meet illusionary yardsticks of good governance and democracy set by, for example, Transparency International or Freedom House, to which the Chávez administration does not aspire, and which few countries actually meet in practice. Venezuela is but one of a number of countries where the universalist, modernizing assumptions and democratic classifications of liberals should rightfully be challenged on the basis that they do not engage with or measure popular understanding of real existing democracy and its practice.

Compounding the image of Venezuela as a politically complex country that defies facile generalization, it is also evident that political values and opinions are multifaceted. While on the one hand, there is popular support for new participatory mechanisms, at the same time, Venezuelan voters have shown themselves to be guarded in endorsing major structural changes that would allow the Bolivarian model to be institutionalized. Concurring with the findings of *Latinobarómetro*, Hellinger's survey and Velasco's analysis show that Venezuelans are reluctant to dispense with the trappings of liberal democracy, a factor that may have contributed to President Chávez's defeat in the constitutional reform referendum of December 2007 and the subsequent quashing of his ambitions to introduce a new geometry of power in the country. These nuances in opinion merit more sustained and detailed analysis.

Problematically, as Hellinger, Margarita López Maya and Luis Lander, and Velasco outline, there are continuing questions over the meaning and precise contours of the government's participatory vision, further complicating discussions on the nature and future of democracy in Venezuela. By way of contrast to critical commentaries that point to Bolivarianism as a well-articulated authoritarian strategy, the contributions in this volume flag ideological and organizational uncertainty at the highest level of the Venezuelan government. The administration has yet to articulate a comprehensive vision of its participatory model or elucidate how this will work alongside or in place of existing institutional mechanisms such as the National Assembly, ministries, and state governors. The administration's approach to governance has also too often proved inimical to participatory processes. This has been evident in the repeated use of decree powers by Chávez, the promotion of centrally determined candidates in local elections, and the ongoing tensions in the old MVR (*Movimiento Quinta República*) and subsequently the PSUV over the role of the pro-government party. The Chavistas finally convened an ideological congress in November 2009, but the direction and end goals of the revolution remain subject to flux, the necessities of alliance building, and pragmatism. Despite abjuring the formal trappings of liberal democracy, the government has, some-

what ironically, relied heavily on elections rather than popular consultation in order to legitimize its programs and policies. This may have come at the cost of developing and institutionalizing new participatory forms.

Linked with debates on the meaning of democracy, this volume also contributes to discourses on civil society. As outlined in the introduction, underpinning the liberal peace and liberal democracy is the notion of a vibrant and autonomous civil society birthed from free markets and political liberty. But in the contemporary Venezuelan experience, political inclusion and participation have been catalyzed by state support. In the populist and authoritarian schools, this has ipso facto been conflated with demagoguery and clientelism. However, the authors here point to a far more optimistic vision of the potentialities of state-sponsored social organization, though not without raising concerns as well.

Autonomous civil society is reified in the social science literature and in contemporary programs and strategies promoting democracy. Social organization supported and financed by the state is too quickly dismissed as fundamentally at odds with the independence and power-checking capacities that autonomy is seen to provide. But as this volume contends, assumptions about Venezuelan social organization, and conceptual schemas that seek to frame understanding of civil society, are not the same as existing and actual reality. Given gross inequities in the distribution of resources, opportunities, and capacities, it is necessary to question how marginalized and excluded groups can take organizational form and gain traction if not through state assistance. State neglect of financial support for associational opportunities for the poorest serves only to institutionalize grotesque inequities in access and participation. In countries such as Venezuela, these inequalities are reinforced by external funding programs, for example, the National Endowment for Democracy, that channel resources to those who have access to program managers, who can complete funding application forms, and who share the interests of the United States in the region, which is to say the old elite. In sum, autonomous civil society is an ideal type that rarely exists in practice and whose democratic tendencies should not be taken for granted. More crucially, as a number of the chapters in this volume highlight, state funding should not be automatically conflated with depreciated autonomy or inevitable harmony with the administration.

The contributions by López Maya and Lander, María Pilar García-Guadilla, Naomi Schiller, Sujatha Fernandes, Velasco, and David Smilde and Coraly Pagan certainly highlight the dilemmas faced by state-sponsored organizations and the complex evaluations that have to be made by actors seeking to position themselves favorably with the administration. Decisions on linkages and maximization of access are forged within a highly unstable context characterized

by a perennial turnover of personnel and a high level of reliance on personal contacts and informal networks. While this raises issues of co-optation, it is through the rich discussion of contingent autonomy that this volume portrays the density of Venezuelan civil society, the complexity of contemporary social relations, and the multiple spaces for negotiation.

The chapters by Luis Duno Gottberg, Elizabeth Gackstetter Nichols, and Smilde and Pagan remind us that opponents of the government have also had to adjust to evolving participatory opportunities and limitations on the promotion of their influence and interests. The capacity to articulate critical positions was severely eroded following the collapse of the historically dominant parties and their subsequent decision not to participate in electoral processes. As the organizational impetus passed to the media, the Catholic Church, the private sector and the national intelligentsia, opponents of the government forged new spaces for dissent outside of formal institutions, exploiting principles of freedom of speech and organization to discredit and delegitimize the government. A reading of Duno Gottberg's chapter reinforces Smilde's introductory remarks that civil society is not necessarily progressive or democratic, while both of Hellinger's chapters—on *Aporrea.org* and on community-level participation—point to the potential for this antagonism to be channeled through the new participatory framework. Taken together, these chapters reinforce a vision of sweeping social and cultural change and experimentation across all sectors with new organizational forms that have been driven by conflict, revolution, and legacies of the pre-Chávez period. These may not prove enduring, but the chapters make it clear that the changes cannot be simply rolled back. Political inclusion and participation have expanded exponentially in the country, with important ramifications for the future of the Chávez government and the post-Chávez political landscape.

In providing a legal framework for social organization, and in some cases financing participatory initiatives, the Chávez administration may have created serious long-term constraints on its own power. Whether these organizations are part of the unofficial structure of governance—such as the MTAS (Mesas Técnicas de Agua), the CTUs (Comités de Tierras Urbanas), the missions, and the communal councils—or not (as with the community media organizations), they demonstrate a marked tendency toward independence and defense of constituency interests, which is in turn premised on the networks and functions of accountability that bind them to their own communities and social bases (Antillano 2005). The participatory initiatives consequently emerge as vectors of democracy. These complicated transactional realities, often obscured by analytical and classificatory schemes putting the focus on authori-

tarianism and high politics, are captured in a number of the chapters presented here.

In this context, another valuable contribution of this volume is in writing the long-neglected history of organization and activism among the traditional elite—as discussed by Smilde and Pagan and by Nichols—and in reclaiming barrio histories from Chavismo. It is commonly assumed that associational life in the barrios was negligible until the ascent to power of the Chávez government. This feeds into populist accounts that look to Chavismo as a top-down model of social incorporation and subsequent demobilization, and also into a Bolivarian narrative that posits barrio organization as a product of the revolution and its defense. The reality, marginalized in established scholarship on Venezuela, is that self-organization and activism has a vibrant history in the most deprived and marginalized neighborhoods of the country. It is certainly the case that the Chávez government provided unprecedented financial support and official access to these groups and associations, but the idea that Chávez inherited a *tabula rasa* of organizations among the poor that it subsequently set about molding is quite wrong.

Without knowledge of these informal traditions and associational forms, it is difficult to engage with the constraints faced by the Chávez government or to understand the myriad of networks that embed accountability and structure legitimacy. Loyalties and identities are evidently crafted by both proximate, localized concerns and broader macro-ideological allegiances, but it should not be assumed that the latter inevitably trumps the former. Community activism is structured by rational and immediate interests, and where these are countered or negated by national policy, they will be defended. Recognition of and re-engagement with the diverse histories of community organization point to a stronger capacity for autonomy and dissent than is commonly assumed, particularly given the spur to organizational coherence that has been provided by political conflict and material support from the state.

Bolivarianism in Context

As in any revolutionary process, the Chávez government's agenda faced strong resistance from the historical status quo—resistance that was notoriously supported and condoned by the United States and some European and South American countries. Despite the noisy, destabilizing, and frequently unconstitutional and undemocratic interventions on the part of the administration's opponents, Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution prevailed. In a region where

progressive ideologies have been violently suppressed, where edgings toward European social democracy have been quashed as communist infiltration, and where the demands of the “barbarous” majority have been brutally sidelined, Bolivarianism marked a revolutionary rupture from traditional domestic and regional alignments of power and ideology. That this was achieved within the bounds of electoral democracy and through constant recourse to popular consultation (including five referenda between 1999 and 2008) makes this process of change all the more significant.

Despite the emphasis on revolution and change, in locating itself within the Venezuelan historical context this book is also positioned to highlight issues of continuity. Many of the chapters express concern that the Chávez administration is making the same mistakes as the Punto Fijo period. Elements of this continuity are evident in, for example, the discussion on the sustainability of the government’s oil-financed social programs in the contribution by López Maya and Lander. Here the Chávez government appears guilty of replicating misguided Punto Fijo strategies of over-reliance on oil export revenues to finance state-led development strategies. An additional aspect of continuity lies in the patterns of exclusion and inclusion. Contributions in this volume demonstrate that the Bolivarian model, like the Punto Fijo system, is structured around networks of privileged access and loyalty. The distinction between the two regimes is predicated on the displacement of traditional Punto Fijo beneficiaries with a new constituency of favorites. The dynamics of zero-sum politics and conflict between groups who are in or out have consequently persisted. Politicization, corruption, and favoritism emerge as serious challenges for the Chávez administration, just as they were during the Punto Fijo period, with ultimately debilitating implications. And just as previous presidents relied on decree powers to push through major programs, so Chávez has fallen back on enabling authorities in order to drive through his project of revolutionary change. The manner and execution of executive authority, based as it is on a high concentration of powers, has therefore not been adequately addressed by the Chávez government, despite its commitment to creating a new participatory democracy and despite the generous financial resources it directs toward communal councils.

As highlighted in a number of the chapters, organizational approaches persist that emphasize penetration and control of independent social organizations. This was a key characteristic of party political activity during the Punto Fijo period, and it is one that has been perpetuated by the Chávez government. Linked with this, and as discussed by Hellinger, the Chávez administration has found it difficult to build a political organization dedicated to the promotion of consultative processes. As during the Punto Fijo period, machine poli-

tics and related issues of candidate favoritism, parachuting of central-party-favored candidates and sidelining of local candidates have continued during the Bolivarian process, hindering the development and institutionalization of new mobilization and organizational forms at the community level.

A final element of continuity that merits highlighting relates to institutionalism. A fundamental problem during the Punto Fijo period was that the country's elites failed to develop functioning, meritocratic institutions capable of delivering public goods in a neutral and universal manner. The chapters by López Maya and Lander and by García-Guadilla demonstrate that consolidation of policy initiatives and institutionalization of processes have not been priorities for the Chávez administration. This failure in turn has serious implications for the government's ability to ensure the sustainability of its antipoverty and participatory initiatives. As the formal and informal continue to rub alongside each other in a broader context of policy fluctuation and new patterns of favoritism, the potential for adequately monitoring, evaluating, improving, and maintaining projects will diminish. That said, this should not negate the analytical value of exploring the impacts of these programs.

Flux and Motion

This volume repeatedly emphasizes the difficulties of tracking and assessing social and political change in Venezuela. All authors are keenly aware of the rapidly evolving context and the challenges that this poses for evaluating initiatives and the sustainability of new social forms. This recognition of flux and evolution allows this volume to engage with the dynamism of the Bolivarian process, and in doing so, the authors highlight the rigidity of the authoritarian/liberal democracy schema.

The Chávez government of 2009 was a manifestly different proposition from that which initially took power in 1999. When first elected, Chávez cited the British prime minister Tony Blair as a role model, and he endorsed models of “third way socialism,” as espoused by Anthony Giddens in his 1998 publication *The Third Way: Renewal of Social Democracy* (according to Gott 2000, 196). Over the following decade, the Chávez government became progressively more radicalized on the back of rising oil export revenues and as it identified and consolidated its core constituency of support and insulated itself from domestic and international pressures from opponents. In many respects, it could be argued that Venezuela arrived at “twenty-first-century socialism” by default, not design (Buxton 2008).

In this environment of dramatic shifts and lurches, new spaces for access and participation opened up and in some cases closed, there was constant innovation and revision, and networks of influence shifted. It is impossible to capture these dynamics unless new analytical tools are developed through which the evolution of Venezuelan politics can be assessed, and without engaging with the multiple and often hidden spaces of activism and participation. This volume has demonstrated the tensions inherent in the creation and generation of new transactional forms in the country and the need to break with sclerotic conceptual frameworks in order to understand how these operate. In doing so, it presents contemporary social and political relations in Venezuela as complex, multilayered, and shifting. It also points readers to possible future trends as Venezuela has entered a period of major change in the macroeconomic environment and as the governance style has narrowed around the authority of President Chávez. Even if those factors that facilitated the initial laying out of the participatory project and the radical, *ad hoc*, experimentation with popular mobilization have withered, this volume reminds us that the loyalties, values, and aspirations of ordinary Venezuelans should not be assumed or taken for granted by either the government or its critics.

Note

1. See the annual *Latinobarómetro* reports for 2006, 2007, and 2008, <http://www.latinobarometro.org>.