

GEOHISTORICAL STATES
LATIN AMERICAN COUNTERPOINT

PART II

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Part II. Geohistorical States: Latin American Counterpoint

Introduction EDWARD MURPHY

■ Fernando Coronil always returned to writing about Venezuela, the country that he regarded as his home, even as his path led him elsewhere. Using the provocative term that Jamaica Kincaid (1988) adopted to describe her own country, the Caribbean islands of Antigua and Barbuda, Coronil described Venezuela as a “small place.” For both, “smallness” was far from being a mere description of population, geographic boundaries, or gross national product. It was instead indicative of a powerful imaginary that categorized the nations of the Global South as inconsequential. As Coronil insisted, moreover, a putatively small place such as Venezuela formed a constitutive part of the modern world, shaped in the crucible of ongoing processes of empire in the Americas. Circumstances in Venezuela were the tip of a moving “iceberg.”

Coronil thus undertook the immense challenge of working through Venezuela’s vast, labyrinthine connections and its troubled dynamics as a subaltern, poorly understood nation. Yet his effort to illuminate the country’s unsettled, complex trajectory did not lead him to analytical despair. He never succumbed to postmodern resignation at the impossibility of developing meaningful and transformative knowledge. Referring to the coup against Hugo Chávez in 2002, an event shrouded in secrets, rumors, mistrust, and violence, Coronil wrote in his unfinished manuscript, *Crude Matters*, that he was committed to revealing what “really happened” (this volume, 281). While this included recovering silenced histories and overcoming misconceptions, it also expressed a provocative aspiration. For Coronil, revealing the dynamics behind such an event as the coup was grounded directly in his struggle to imagine a different kind of world—one that would be free of the secrecy and mystifications of power, the deprecation of nature, and systemic forms of violence and subordination.

The urgency of this struggle often led Coronil to undertake work that directly engaged the crises of a given moment. He thus described *Crude Matters*, a book that he had not planned to write, as “an imperative demand” (this volume, 272). In the project, Coronil linked the failed 2002 coup to his longer-term understanding of the making of the Venezuelan state, taking advantage of his ability to interview key players in the event. In this crisis, he saw an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of more general and entrenched dynamics. As he observed, “Because the normal order was unsettled, during these days much that is normally hidden was briefly uncovered” (this volume, 287).

Similarly, “Remembering and Dismembering the Nation,” an article he co-wrote with Julie Skurski, was born in response to two state-promoted massacres in Venezuela that played important roles in the country’s neoliberal turn at the end of the 1980s. These events revealed central myths and deep fissures at the heart of Venezuela’s nationalist project of modernity while also leaving enduring legacies. One of these events, the Caracazo, the term for the widespread popular uprising against the International Monetary Fund and military repression that encompassed Caracas and other cities in 1989, became for Hugo Chávez the massacre that helped to define his revolutionary trajectory. The Caracazo, for Chávez, symbolized the profound injustices and political failures that his movement would overcome.

While crises such as the Caracazo or the 2002 coup demanded Coronil’s attention, they did so in a way that included a critical assessment of what it meant to have these events become defined as crises in the first place. Walter Benjamin’s (1988: 257) insistence that “the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule” remained a guiding principle. In this, the challenge involved developing how the public recognition of emergencies or crises focused widespread attention on intolerable policies and actions while also eliding persistent forms of oppression and subordination. As in the case of Venezuela’s smallness, defining certain circumstances as crises and not others involves a hierarchical mapping of the world, masking structures of power and rendering particular peoples and experiences inconsequential and subordinate. A remapping of social categories and the relationships that undergird them was thus a constant, pressing need.

In Coronil’s work on Venezuela, this remapping invariably led him back to the country’s oil industry and to the notion of the future with which it became entwined. Beginning in the 1920s, Venezuela had been made into an “oil nation,” a commonly used term that Coronil both questioned and

imbued with a deeper meaning. Building on the work of the Latin American school of dependency theory and its analysis of enclave economies, he examined how oil has at once been central to Venezuelan capitalist accumulation and to its state and class formation. Yet Coronil criticized dependency scholars who viewed Venezuela's abundant foreign revenue as an exception to the dynamic of dependency and to its often attendant political instability. Instead, Coronil insisted, Venezuela shared crucial features with other nature-intensive exporting countries in Latin America and the Global South, all of which were also particularly prone to the negative effects of boom and bust cycles.

Coronil developed this insight during his involuntary return to Venezuela in the mid-1970s, a period of a spectacular oil boom, the inverse of the metropolitan oil crisis. This period quite naturally became one of the principal subjects of his book *The Magical State*. In it, Coronil examines the interwoven responses to the sudden "rivers" of international oil rents that flowed into the country, prompting a vision of "El Gran Venezuela" as modern, prosperous, and sovereign. Expansive state and consumer dreams were met by international bank promises, with offers of loans to construct a new Venezuela. Yet the petro-state simultaneously fueled imports in ways that undercut domestic forms of production. The rapid advent of a bust period, as oil prices and revenue fell, made the dreams of modernity and grand plans for transformation unattainable. Yet even in this failure, as Coronil also demonstrates, visions of a modern future persisted, fueled by the ongoing promise of oil revenues.

By establishing multilayered connections among policies, actors, money, and discourses, Coronil moved well beyond conventional political economic analysis. Yet rather than dismissing dependency theory as passé, he seriously engaged the theory's insights while participating in some of the foremost debates of the 1990s and 2000s about capitalism, state formation, and nationalist ideology. At the same time, his focus on nature, extraction, and ground rent anticipated more recent concerns with infrastructure and a "new materialism." His analysis of the oil economy and the oil state thus transcended conventional intellectual boundaries and disciplinary divides, ambitiously linking frameworks and objects of study that are typically treated in isolation from each other. As with the other elements of his work, elements of dependency theory were not mere building blocks. They were an active, inter-related presence, much like oil.

In Venezuela, Coronil argued, oil has ultimately shaped "politics at every level, defining the relation between citizens and nation, the formation of

social classes, and the constitution of the state as the country's central political and economic agent" ("Venezuela's Wounded Bodies," this volume, 250). In the national imaginary, oil has acted as a kind of connective tissue that has brought the nation together. Yet as a volatile and intoxicating global commodity, oil has also torn the nation apart, fostering conflicts and fueling unfulfilled promises. In developing this perspective, Coronil claimed that Venezuela has two bodies: a natural body (territory and natural resources, including its oil) and a social body (people and citizens). In this conception, oil looms as the haunting and tantalizing promise of well-being and national redemption for the citizenry. As a solvent capable of reconciling the nation's two bodies, the state has maintained a powerful, even magical, hold on popular consciousness. It served as the custodian and developer of the nation's subsoil, promising to transform crude oil reserves into a changed landscape for the citizenry, "conjuring up the most fantastic dreams of progress" ([2000] 2016: 35). In this register, the state promises not only justice and effective governance but also national sovereignty and modernization. For Coronil, such promises take place in the powerful domain of what he termed "state fetishism."

Through oil production, the Venezuelan state became a landowner reliant on ground rent for profit, extracting surplus value from a nature-intensive industry. Given the volatile character of oil markets, the spectacular profit that oil can provide has also been unreliable and difficult to control. In analyzing the state's role as a landowner, Coronil built on Marx's (1981: 953) often overlooked argument that capitalism should be understood as a trinity form composed of capital-profit, labor-wages, and land-ground rent, each understood as an interactive bundle of social and spatial relations. While previous analysts examined how states mediated the relationship between capital and labor, they paid insufficient attention to the state's role in extracting and profiting from natural resource exports. But this mediation, Coronil demonstrated, is precisely what characterized Venezuela as an "oil nation."

Oil politics thus allowed Coronil to challenge the notion of Venezuela as a small or exceptional place. In Venezuela, as in many nations in the Global South, state-mediated ground rents from nature-intensive industries has been a critical, if overlooked, element in the making of global capitalism. The roots of this dynamic extend to the beginnings of colonialism in the Americas, as Spain and its colonies acted as rentier states in the production of such products as silver and sugar. Ultimately, Venezuela's trajectory as an oil nation has been forged in the inequitable and uneven processes of

what Coronil insisted were the intertwined historical dynamics of capitalism and imperialism.

The Venezuelan state has occupied a critical and ambiguous space as a node and mediator in these global processes. As the caretaker of the nation's oil and its sovereignty, offering the appearance of autonomy, the state could promise, and at times deliver, wealth to the nation. But these promises and the state's ability to act on them were always circumscribed by its interactions with global forces. This long-term tension only deepened in the wake of Hugo Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution. As Coronil develops in "Oilpacity," the Chávez presidency actually intensified Venezuela's dependence on oil. This happened, in no small measure, because the regime sought to use oil income almost exclusively to address social problems. Resource dependency subsequently grew along with imports, while the business sector declined and shifted into financial and commercial activities. Following the coup, Chávez began to develop joint ventures with foreign companies, a process that helped both Chávez and the oil companies to consolidate their respective positions. As this unfolded, Chávez, a self-proclaimed anti-imperialist, came to rely ever more heavily on foreign oil companies and oil-export revenue. Like previous heads of state, then, Chávez maintained the vision of oil wealth as providing the promised future.

Coronil never shied away from confronting the contradictions of power or the power of contradictions. Throughout his work, he explored a troubled world of dominance, illusion, opacity, and mystification, shot through with silence, secrecy, violence, and inequity. Yet his analytical vision was never singularly bleak or without hope. For him, the very act of unveiling the labyrinthine histories of a seemingly small place such as Venezuela was a cause for optimism. By treating Venezuela not as a clearly delimited and isolated entity, but as a nation forged through intricate processes of transculturation within global relations of capitalism and imperialism, Coronil pursued what he called "a more democratic vision of history" ("Crude Matters," this volume, 286).

As with all of the terms he employed, Coronil critically assessed the use and effects of "democracy." In his essay "Transitions to Transitions," he recognized that "democracy" could itself be used in problematic ways, as when it was understood as an isolated set of practices or institutions that "developed" countries had and "developing" countries needed to obtain. He recognized democracy as a much broader concept, forming part of a shared inheritance from and beyond the Americas. He thus linked this concept to its

shared pasts, presents, and possible futures. As Coronil insisted, the point is not simply to develop an exchange of ideas *about* democracy but, rather, to develop ideas *for* democracy (“Transitions to Transitions,” this volume, 231). Concrete analyses of so-called small places in the Global South such as Venezuela were an integral part of this process. They were also a step toward realizing a more just and desirable world.

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