

Review Essays/Ensayos de Reseña

Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution as Seen through Foreign Eyes

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- *The Enduring Legacy. Oil, Culture and Society in Venezuela*, by Miguel Tinker Salas. Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2009.
- *Rethinking Venezuelan Politics. Class, Conflict and the Chávez Phenomenon*, by Steve Ellner. Boulder/London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2008.
- *Changing Venezuela by Taking Power. The History and Policies of the Chávez Government*, by Gregory Wilpert. London/New York: Verso, 2007.
- *The Real Venezuela. Making Socialism in the 21st Century*, by Iain Bruce. London: Pluto Press, 2008.
- *Democracy and Revolution. Latin America and Socialism Today*, by D.L. Raby. London/Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2006.

Simón Bolívar once commented that revolutions should be observed close at hand but that they needed to be analysed and assessed guarding a certain distance. The distance he appeared to have in mind was literal, physical distance but the suggestion is valid if we take it as a metaphor. Indeed, we could understand the academic disciplines used to interpret revolutions, or social change in general, as attempts to systematize mechanisms designed to produce a healthy distance between what is being observed and the conclusions which are drawn from it.

In the case of revolutions, the need for observing them close at hand is particularly marked because the second-hand sources are notoriously unreliable, in the sense that they are almost inevitably coloured by the political proclivities of the observer in a situation which is always sharply polarized. Venezuela under Chávez is just one of the most recent cases. The distance is also particularly necessary, amongst other things because revolutions tend to question long-standing assumptions, reveal powerful but neglected undercurrents which need to be interpreted in new ways and, not least important, can be better understood with the benefit of a comparative perspective.

These comments occur to me because the five books under review are about contemporary Venezuela, are all written in English and, with the partial exception of Tinker Salas, the authors are all foreigners, educated abroad, almost all Anglo-Saxons to boot. This provides an additional dimension to the problem because there is a certain Nativist tradition (identified in Venezuela with the *adecos*) which argues that foreigners (and particularly Anglo-Saxons), are incapable of fully understanding Latin American culture and/or history or politics, precisely because there is a cultural gap which it is extremely difficult to bridge.

In fact, the five authors, in very different ways, make what I consider substantial contributions to our understanding of the impact of the Bolivarian revolution. It appears to me of particular interest to examine how each of them has broached the problem of combining close-up observation with those academic tools which offer, even more so than any physical distance, that perspective which Bolívar regarded as so necessary.

The importance of oil

In order to explore this aspect of the problem, the most interesting case, in some ways, is that of Tinker Salas who has written a book which is not dedicated primarily at understanding Chavism as are the others, although it undoubtedly contributes to this end. Nor is the author a typical foreigner: he is the son of a North American father (who was working for an oil company in Venezuela) and an educated Venezuelan mother (from a well-connected family). He was born and bred in one of the oil camps in Venezuela and later completed his education in the United States and dedicated himself to an academic career there, where he is currently Professor of Latin American and Chicano Studies. His book is dedicated to an analysis of the impact of the oil industry on Venezuela since it began to dominate the economy. Of course, there is already a substantial literature dedicated to the theme but Tinker Salas offers two fresh elements: firstly, his inside knowledge of what it means to live within the industry because he was born and bred there, together with a range of family connections which increase the types of sources he is able to explore. This initial advantage is consolidated on the basis of a meticulous coverage of archives, secondary sources and oral testimonies.

The second element is related to his academic formation: unlike the majority of those who have examined the impact of oil on Venezuela, Tinker Salas is not an economist, nor a political scientist (whatever his formal training). He could perhaps best be characterized as a social historian. As such, he has been profoundly influenced by the different advances in this academic field during recent decades: its search for ways of garnering evidence over the characteristics of those subordinate classes or groups which are not adequately reflected in the traditional historical sources, its interest in understanding history in terms of the every-day experiences of the members of society, in the way social groups (or classes) are formed, achieve cohesion, are reproduced and change over time, in the way social (and ethnic) groups relate (beyond the dry data proportioned by the traditional studies over status, or the dogmatic formulas of vulgar Marxists), in the role of racial prejudices and stereotypes in cementing social structures of domination, in the changing role of women, etc. In short, interest is focused on real people and on their varied and variable cultural values and, to the extent that there is conflict between groups and classes, not on any supposed 'objective' situation, but rather on the way the conflict is seen and felt.

Tinker Salas' research is devoted basically to the experience and impact of the oil industry on Venezuela between the twenties and the fifties of the last century. As a historical analysis it is magnificent and must be recommended without reservations to all those interested in the subject. But for the purposes of this review, we are much more interested in how, according to Tinker Salas, this legacy continues

to influence what is going on in Venezuela, especially its relevance for understanding the experience under Chávez. His analysis suggests that the decisive watershed for Chavism was the oil lock-out in December 2002. His analysis of the relations between the foreign oil companies and the Venezuelan State from the twenties until the sixties indicates that the two most important companies, Shell and Creole (a subsidiary of Standard Oil), were fairly successful in adapting to regime changes and, above all, in selling an image of the oil industry as an expression of modernization and as a condition for the prosperity of the country (and especially to its middle classes). For this reason, the 'nationalism' of Rómulo Betancourt (twice President from 1945-48 and from 1959-63, and considered by many the 'father' of Venezuelan democracy) never seriously questioned the presence of the companies, it simply bargained for better terms.

The nationalization of the industry in 1975, as was more or less evident at the time, did not imply a conflict with those companies supposedly 'expropriated'. The concessions were about to expire, profits were no longer in exploration and production (but rather in control over commercialization) and the terms of the nationalization left the companies satisfied. It even contained a clause which would enable them to return in the future if they were interested (the famous Article N° 5). Tinker Salas stresses the continuity between the companies under foreign control and their nationalized successors: both the administrative structures and the Venezuelan personnel remained intact.

Nevertheless, one result of nationalization was that Congress and the political parties lost interest in the oil industry. At the same time, the government, together with the Mines and Energy Ministry, began to see their influence on policy decisions waning, as the directives of the new State company, *Petróleos de Venezuela S.A.* (Pdvsa), assumed decisions over the future of the oil industry on their own account. Paradoxically, while the foreign oil firms had needed to dedicate serious attention to their relationship with the successive Venezuelan governments, Pdvsa was able to largely ignore them.

There was a second contrast. The foreign companies, above all in the fifties and sixties, consciously wooed public opinion, promoting an image of the companies as spearheading a modernization and growth which benefited the entire nation and, as general living standards were improving, their campaign was largely successful. Pdvsa, however, while continuing to be seen as a privileged enclave, could hardly be presented as stimulating improved living conditions for the majorities during the eighties and nineties, for these were suffering a process of progressive impoverishment, more marked than in any other Latin American country. Indeed, it became more plausible to see the oil industry as both privileged and parasitic, especially as its contribution to the national budget, by way of royalties and taxes, was sharply reduced in the nineties.

In this way, Tinker Salas provides elements for understanding why the upper echelons of the oil industry were so radically opposed to the attempts by the Chávez government to re-establish government control over the industry. And why, once they launched the lock-out which was aimed at toppling Chávez, they had to face a powerful undercurrent of popular repudiation which contributed in an important way to their failure.

Rethinking Venezuelan politics

Steve Ellner, as the title of his book suggests, is the other author concerned to relate the Chávez phenomenon to our way of understanding Venezuela's history. Ellner is a North American who has lived in Venezuela during the last thirty years or more. His academic formation was as a historian and his doctoral degree (published in Venezuela in 1980) was dedicated to understanding the origins of the Venezuelan labour movement and its relations to the incipient political parties in the thirties and forties.

Subsequently, he wrote several other books: an analysis of the labour movement after 1958, another on the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) party which broke off from the Venezuelan Communist Party in the early seventies, several compilations, and dozens of articles covering a wide range of themes related to his basic interest which has always been Venezuela. During the last decade, he has dedicated his attention almost exclusively to the 'Chávez phenomenon'.

Despite the radical changes in Venezuela since he published his first book, Ellner's basic concerns have remained intact. His two books on the labour movement were not the result of a simple academic option; they reflected his conviction that, in order to understand the fundamental problems of society, the general tendency to neglect the social conflicts provoked by the pattern of labour relations was a serious flaw in the political science tradition. Well over a decade ago, he began to criticize the 'exceptionalism thesis', that is to say, the predominant tendency amongst North American (and also Venezuelan) political scientists to portray Venezuela as somehow 'different', not in the sense that any country needs to be understood in terms of its particular characteristics, but as though its combination of oil resources and an enlightened, responsible and moderate political leadership (after 1958) had succeeded in providing the solution to the endemic problems of the continent: instability, rebelliousness and even class conflict. Beyond the 'illusion of harmony', he always looked for the sources of potential conflict, convinced that they would inevitably rear their ugly head and belie the optimistic expectations of those who portrayed Venezuela as a model democracy and as a showcase for the rest of the continent.

This most recent book is, at one and the same time, a way of presenting the basic concerns which have been behind his research during the last thirty years, and also an attempt to suggest that the explosive emergence and consolidation of Chavism, not only justifies what he was trying to say about the limitations of the predominant academic tradition in political science; but (even more important) needs to be understood on the basis of a rereading of previous Venezuelan history and politics.

The first half of the book is dedicated to developing his thesis on the basis of an analysis of Venezuelan historiography since the early nineteenth century. He assumes an explicitly revisionist posture, questioning firstly: 'traditional historians writing on the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century [who] emphasized the random violence of the War of Independence and its long-term aftermath, while minimizing the importance of political and especially social demands and aspirations that had important repercussions in the modern period after 1936'; then, 'politically motivated interpretations from Betancourt to Chávez [that] have simplified

and distorted history'; and finally, 'exceptionalism literature and thinking, which portrayed the post-1958 democracy as a model for the rest of Latin America [...]' (pp. 13-14). Ellner is well-read and his argument is of undoubted interest for those familiar with Venezuelan historiography. But at the same time, the discussion, precisely because it is structured in order to sustain his general argument, is also useful as an introduction for those less familiar with the theme.

In any event, in the 'conclusions' to the book, Ellner confesses that 'the general thrust of this book draws on two Marxist traditions [...]. The book's emphasis on empowerment and historical memory is informed by the historiography and methodologies associated with such historians as E.P. Thompson and Herbert Gutman, sometimes referred to as "people's history" or "bottom-up history" [...]. The second tradition focuses on State power' (p. 223). This 'confession' may well come as a surprise to the reader who has accompanied the author throughout the book, but it is true. The basic, permanent concerns which inspire Ellner's work are undoubtedly related to the Marxist tradition, although their influence in the social sciences in general hardly permits them to be thought of as exclusively Marxist. However, the reader's surprise is also justified because, while reading the text, it never occurred to him that the analysis was 'Marxist'. And, of course, it is not.

Ellner's basic methodological instrument is the dichotomy (not the 'contradiction', which is more identified with Marxism). This becomes particularly clear when, in the second half of the book, Ellner discusses the experience of Venezuela under Chávez. The problems identified within the ranks of Chávez supporters are reduced basically to the confrontation between two alternatives logics (or mini-ideal types). They are approached above all in terms of the dichotomy between a hard-line and a soft-line, and between a Statist approach and a grass-roots approach.

Although the methodological instruments are rather crude, the results are always suggestive, basically because the scheme is developed on the basis of an intimate knowledge of what is occurring in the country, so that the dichotomies reflect real dilemmas and the way of approaching these dilemmas is based on real-life experience. For instance, in discussing the internal currents within Chavism, Ellner highlights four areas in which they can be clearly differentiated: within the MVR party (the manuscript was finished before the founding of the PSUV), in the Chavist labour movement, in the state-run oil industry and in the discussion over the parallel structures promoted by the State (and generally identified with the 'Missions'). In all these areas, he is well-informed and reveals tensions which have hitherto been given very little coverage in the academic literature. In this sense, he effectively provides an approach which amounts to 'rethinking' the contemporary and historical Venezuelan experience and which helps to understand Chavism, not as an inexplicable deviation in the history of the country, but rather as a political phenomenon deeply rooted in the national experience and, precisely for that reason, a profound challenge for academic analysts.

Both the books we have been commenting are best understood and appreciated by those already more or less familiar with what has been going on in Venezuela during the last decade. For those who need a general introduction, Wilpert's book, published in 2007, is still by far the best available in any language. Wilpert is a sociologist who has been living in Venezuela since the beginning of the Chávez

period. He has been writing free-lance and is largely responsible for the best electronic review on Venezuela edited in English (venezuelanalysis.org). As in this review we are assuming that the readership is more or less informed, there is no sense in trying to sum up the book, which has already, and justifiably, received numerous favourable reviews. What we might mention is that Wilpert comments on how the initial measures of the Chávez administration, especially economic and social policy, were surprisingly moderate, above all taking into account the violence of the opposition reaction. He suggests that the sharp political polarization, which culminated in the attempted coup in April 2002 and in the oil lock-out, was the result, not so much of the measures the government introduced, as to the fact that the hitherto dominant political elite had been simply relegated to the sidelines. The panic which led to the opposition's persistent strategic and tactical errors was the result of fears about what Chávez might do if the dykes were effectively swept away. In any event, the exaggerated nature of the opposition reaction served to radicalize the process.

Towards a twenty-first century socialism?

Wilpert's book analyses the period up to 2006 and, as a result, does not cover the subsequent period, marked by the proposed transition towards a twenty-first-century socialism, although it had already been announced. Unfortunately there has not been a second, updated edition, although Wilpert has continued to publish material in *Venezuela Analysis*. In order to understand the most recent phase of the Bolivarian revolution, we can nevertheless count on the book published by Iain Bruce. Bruce does not have the same academic credentials as the other four authors. He is a journalist and was in Venezuela as BBC correspondent in 2004 and returned in 2007 and 2008 to follow up on a series of interviews with key figures in the areas he considered of particular political interest. The areas he identified and the questions he asks reveal a solid political formation and a keen intelligence. According to the author, 'the aim is to look at the experience of ordinary Venezuelan women and men, and to listen to their voices, as a way of getting inside the process' (p. 13). This objective is the result of Bruce's stated conviction that 'the experience in Venezuela is once again making it possible to ask some of the big political questions that have been off the agenda for half a generation' (p. 14). These big political questions are basically related to socialism as an alternative to current capitalist society and the search for new ways of achieving it which eschew the notorious shortcomings of social democracy and the centrally-planned authoritarian states of East Europe.

The author takes a close look at various of the novel organizational initiatives: the model endogenous development nucleus *Fabricio Ojeda* in Caracas, an unsuccessful agrarian cooperative in Yaracuy state, the most advanced experiment in 'revolutionary co-management' in the Alcasa aluminium plant on the banks of the Orinoco river, one of the earliest experiments of communal councils in Galipan, a village high up on the coastal mountain range near Caracas, experiments in participatory democracy at a local level in Carora (Lara State) and La Victoria (Aragua State). In all these cases he is concerned to let the protagonists speak for themselves and explain their advances and their frustrations and what they see as the

successes and shortcomings of their experiences. Of all the books reviewed, this is the one that which comes closest to portraying the vitality, the ambiguity, the limitations and the promise of the current process as felt at a grass-roots level. It is a notable achievement of outstanding journalism combined with an acute political sensibility.

The last author we want to comment is inspired, as in the case of Bruce, by a previous interest in socialism. Diana Raby has been a socialist all her life and her academic research on Latin America has always reflected this concern. She is the author who has spent least time in Venezuela, the only one who has never been a resident, although she has been an assiduous visitor during the last few years. On the other hands, she is the author who goes furthest in placing the Venezuelan experience within a comparative perspective and explaining its importance for reopening those 'big political questions' which Bruce had also commented.

Despite the author's impeccable academic credentials (currently Research Fellow in the University of Liverpool), the book has none of the anaemic pretensions to 'objectivity' or to 'scientific status' so common amongst academics (including many academic Marxists). It is a polemic which starts off assuming that capitalism as a system needs to be replaced, that its democratic pretensions are spurious and ever more clearly so; and that the central problem of politics is how to achieve a revolutionary transformation of society capable of reconciling socialism with a deepening of democratic values and praxis. This is not, of course, a new theme. Indeed, it is a traditional preoccupation on the Left. What is new, however, is the refreshing way in which Raby approaches the problem and the implications of the conclusions for current revolutionary praxis.

After an initial chapter discussing the disarray of the Left in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the author offers a thoughtful chapter entitled 'Democracy, Formal or Substantive: When Liberalism Becomes Counter-Revolutionary'. This chapter is concerned to debunk the 'received wisdom' about democracy and present an alternative radical view rooted in the socialist tradition. It is also concerned to demonstrate how the impact of neoliberalism has affected the political legitimacy of the prevailing system and led to an 'emerging crisis of consensus politics in the West'. The chapter concludes suggesting that 'it is in Latin America that the failure of the liberal model has provoked the most interesting and indeed revolutionary response' (p. 48).

But before examining the Latin American experience, Raby continues the discussion of a popular revolutionary alternative. Holloway-type illusions are criticized and the author insists that the problem is one of power (and not anti-power). At the same time, the pervasive Marxist tradition of 'democratic centralism' is rejected on two grounds: firstly, because the party structure is inherently undemocratic; and secondly, because the self-proclaimed 'vanguard' has proved consistently incapable of effectively 'leading' a broadly-based popular struggle to achieve power (except within the exceptional context of those national liberation struggles linked to the experience of two World Wars). The conclusion is that 'as for the issue of the political instrument of popular power and revolution, there can be no doubt that a unified movement or party with some kind of effective central leadership is necessary. It must however be internally democratic and above all must have, and must maintain at all times, deep roots in autonomous popular

movements, movements which it does not control but which it must strive to represent both in its own structures and in any instances of state power in which it gains influence or power' (p. 76).

At this point, Raby dedicates three chapters to Latin American revolutionary experiences in order to demonstrate how her argument is rooted precisely in the evidence offered by these experiences. First she examines the Cuban Revolution; then the current Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela; and finally she considers what conclusions can be drawn from the failures of the revolutionary governments in Chile with the Popular Unity (1970-1973), in Nicaragua with the Sandinists (1979-1990) and, finally, in Portugal after the overthrow of the Salazar regime in 1974. (This last, relatively little-known case is included in part in order to suggest that the Latin American revolutionary tradition is not altogether alien to the European context; in part, because it effectively serves to reinforce the argument.) In these three chapters, Raby lays the basis for seducing her readers into accepting the conclusions, insinuated in the previous discussion, but finally developed in the last two chapters of the book.

The controversial conclusion (difficult for any traditional Left reader to digest) is that the strength and durability of both the Cuban and Venezuelan revolutionary regimes is due fundamentally to their 'revolutionary populist' roots and characteristics. Beyond the analysis of these two experiences offered in an earlier chapter, Raby bases her argument on the interpretation of the 'classic' Latin American populist experience originally offered by Ernesto Laclau in the late seventies. The persistent political impotence of the traditional Left over the years is to be explained by its radical incapacity to 'interpelate' the broad popular masses. The greater revolutionary potential of populism derives precisely from its capacity to interpellate and mobilize a broadly-based popular movement by awakening the most profound aspirations of those traditionally excluded and exploited by the prevailing system.

However, Raby goes beyond Laclau and explores some of the central problems faced by a victorious revolutionary populist regime, especially those related to the problem of democracy. Both in Cuba and in Venezuela, the revolutionary populist regimes have been led by a 'charismatic' figure so evidently dominant that opponents immediately recur to the accusation of 'dictatorship'. So Raby is concerned to examine the role of the revolutionary leader, his relationship with the 'masses' and the implications for any theory of 'representation'. In a short review, we can hardly do justice to this discussion. We can merely suggest that it is an important starting-point for a serious debate.

Back to Bolívar

We have suggested that Simón Bolívar was right to emphasize the need to guard a certain distance in order to analyse and assess the impact of a revolution. We have also argued that, despite Nativist objections, foreigners are clearly capable of providing revealing analyses, on the condition that they succeed in observing the revolution close at hand. The contributions we have reviewed simply serve to reinforce the point.

However, Bolívar did not have foreigners in mind when he made the commen-

tary. He was thinking of himself and his colleagues, who had been totally immersed in the War of Independence and therefore basically faced the problem of standing back and taking distance from the events. And it could be argued that the same problem faces those Venezuelans currently engaged in the Bolivarian revolution, whatever their political inclinations. Despite an abundant academic production dedicated to the Chávez period, the Venezuelans tend to write articles, broaching aspects of the experience but eschewing attempts to offer overall interpretations such as those we have been analysing here. Significantly, two authors, of the very few exceptions which come to mind, took advantage of a year spent abroad in order to write their respective books.¹

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Note

1. Carlos Blanco. *Revolución y desilusión: la Venezuela de Hugo Chávez* (Caracas. Los Libros de Catarata, 2002) was written during a year spent at Harvard; and Margarita López-Maya: *Del viernes negro al referendo revocatorio* (Caracas: Alfadil, 2005) took advantage of a year at St. Anthony's College, Oxford.