

Book Review

– *The Fernando Coronil Reader. The struggle for life is the matter*, by Julie Skurski, Gary Wilder, Laurent Dubois, Paul Eiss, Edward Murphy, Mariana Coronil, and David Pedersen. Duke University Press, 2019

Venezuelan anthropologist and historian Fernando Coronil (1944-2011) was a prominent scholar best known for his study of the politics of oil and the publication of his ground-breaking book *The magical state: Nature, money, and modernity in Venezuela* (1997). A tribute to Coronil and his scholarship, *The Fernando Coronil Reader. The struggle for life is the matter* consists of a reproduction of works published by the author between 1991 and 2011, including his landmark essays “Beyond Occidentalism” and “The future in question,” as well as two chapters from his unfinished book manuscript, “Crude matters.” The book is structured in four sections: a general introduction and three thematic focused parts containing a selection of Coronil’s body of work.

The introduction, co-authored by Coronil’s daughter, Mariana Coronil, and U.S. university-based anthropologists and Coronil’s colleagues Laurent Dubois, Julie Skurski, and Gary Wilder, offers an important and indispensable biographical journey through Coronil’s life. It emphasizes different personal events that, alongside his partner in life Julie Skurski, allows the reader to trace the early development of Coronil’s critical and political thought, both in his native Venezuela and in the United States, where the scholar was trained and worked for the University of Michigan and the City University of New York. This insightful introduction intertwines family stories and photographs with thoughtful commentaries on Coronil’s intellectual and affective trajectories, providing the reader with a unique blend of intimacy and scholarly remarks difficult to attain in other *Readers* and academic works of the like. In general, it enhances and sheds light on little known aspects of Coronil’s life and work, contextualizing his scholarship and critical effort to engage with issues related to Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Global South.

The first section, “Labyrinths of critique. The promise of anthrohistory,” introduced by anthropologist David Pedersen, features essays organized around Coronil’s concept of anthrohistory. Written as a thoughtful discussion of the anthropological method of enquiry, Coronil’s prime essay “Pieces of anthrohistory.

A puzzle to be assembled” (53-68) pulls back from the dominant history and politics of Western knowledge to propose anthrohistory as an alternative approach to anthropology and history. In Coronil’s words, anthrohistory can be understood as an “ensemble of practices for examining human practices through ever changing prisms” (54). Such an approach favours, from a dynamic and relational understanding, the assemblage of disciplinary, ethico-political, and aesthetic optics or prisms in order to “produce representations of the world as fragments of an unfolding totality” (54). In that sense, anthrohistory calls for an epistemological shift within United States and Western-oriented academia by examining what has been recorded and uncover what has been silenced in order to bring light to other histories that are underwritten by fetishized and imperial geo-historical categories.

The second section, “Geohistorical states: Latin American counterpoint,” introduced by anthropologist Edward Murphy, presents critical essays showcasing Coronil’s work on Venezuela and its interrelation with oil. The highlight of this part of the book is the manuscript “Crude matters: Seizing the Venezuelan petrostate in times of Chávez” (266-306), on the coup d’état against Venezuelan president Chávez in 2002. The text revisits one of Coronil’s main research interests: revealing the dynamics behind Venezuelan politics and their relationship with the secrecy and mystification of power, the depredation of nature, and the systemic forms of violence and subordination – all of these key topics in his previous *The magical state*. This approach enhances an issue widely discussed in Venezuelan academia, but still secluded and entrenched in political bias and polarization: political opacity in a country conditioned by oil exploitation. Although unfinished, “Crude matters” shows the putting into practice of anthrohistory by exploring how a public sense of the real is constructed from positions that reflect various forms of power and influence.

The third section, “Beyond Occidentalism, beyond empire,” introduced by anthropologist Paul Eiss, foregrounds Coronil’s discussions on empire and its epistemological legacies. In these essays Coronil reframes and re-discusses key terms associated to Postcolonial Studies, such as Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, critically questioned by Coronil’s proposal in “Occidentalism” (315-322) in terms of how Western political dominance and modes of knowledge have affected the (self)representation of different societies. Equally important is Coronil’s proposal to pluralize the idea of colonialism, as showed in “Latin American postcolonial studies and global decolonization” (399-424), in order to recognize the multiple forms of Western empire and imperialism in a global context. This section provides the reader with key terms to engage with Coronil’s scholarship, and it can be taken as an aid to understand his epistemological and historical frame.

The Fernando Coronil Reader is an invaluable addition to the field of Latin American Studies from a myriad of perspectives – e.g. anthropology, history, cultural studies. Coronil’s work challenges us to rethink our approaches to key contemporary epistemological, political, and ethical questions. Although the

majority of the essays are available to consult in different online publications, the effort put by the editors to thematically organize the texts and historicize them adds value to Coronil's body of work. This is something the editors should be credited for. However, the book misses the relevance of Coronil's intellectual production linked to the ongoing debates around environmental issues. In the essays collected in the volume, one can identify the configuration of an ecological awareness, as well as the early deployment of a critical approach to the environment, strongly related to significant questions in terms of natural resource extraction, capitalism, imperialism, and neocolonialism. To read Coronil's body of work alongside theories and methodologies of political ecology would have been beneficial for the *Reader*. Moreover, given the relevance of these ideas in Coronil's scholarship, the opportunity to closely tie the essays with the ongoing expansion of disciplines within the umbrella of environmental humanities and social sciences is not developed sufficiently in this book. Nonetheless, it cannot be stressed enough the relevance of the volume and the accomplished work done by the editors in compiling these essays. *The Fernando Coronil Reader* definitely contributes to showcase and highlight the importance and urgency of Coronil's work today.

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