

Review / Reseña

Gill, Timothy M. *Encountering US Empire in Socialist Venezuela: The Legacy of Race, Neocolonialism, and Democracy Promotion*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2022. 259 pp.

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In the midst of democracy promotion efforts in several Latin American countries that are increasingly moving outside of the United States orbit (Mexico), as well as the recent US-recognized coup d'état in Peru, Timothy M. Gill's *Encountering US Empire in Socialist Venezuela: The Legacy of Race, Neocolonialism, and Democracy Promotion* is a strikingly relevant volume. Making use of leaked diplomatic cables made available by Wikileaks, Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, and interviews with NGO employees, opposition organizers, and US State Department officials in Venezuela, Gill draws a powerful and convincing vignette of US foreign policy increasingly carried out under the guise of seemingly non-partisan "Democracy Promotion" initiatives in Venezuela from 1999-2013. Tracing the work of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the International Republican Institute (IRI), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the Solidarity Center (SC), the Center for International Private Investment (CIPE), the Department of Defense (DOD), the Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), and in dialogue with scholars such as Eva Gollinger, Gill shows how an overwhelming majority of US taxpayer-funded democracy assistance in Venezuela was directed toward opposition groups such as Súmate, and that US

democracy promotion organizations at times even supported anti-democratic efforts (such as the 2002 coup d'état which briefly and unconstitutionally deposed Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez). More than pointing out United States hypocrisy or intervention to make sense of the Venezuelan government's foreign policy, or Venezuela's rightful claims of election interference from without, Gill's aim is to zoom out in time and space, painting democracy promotion as an updated technique of colonial power in the post-Cold War period that converges with an older architecture of US and European empire. Gill takes aim at a variety of explanatory models (modernization theory, the "neo-Tocquevillian" perspective, and others) to help us see with new eyes the contemporary operation of United States power abroad. Theoretically, *Encountering US Empire in Socialist Venezuela* "centralize[s] the work of W. E. B. Du Bois, but also Edward Said and Anibal Quijano, and their emphasis on the global color line, Orientalist thought, and coloniality" to think through "the sense of the superiority evidenced by US government actors and their sense of paternalism over countries in Latin America" (14). It is, therefore, a very interesting and relevant volume that complicates the expressly non-partisan nature of US democracy promotion efforts with exhaustive archival research and field work, as well an ambitious theoretical document that attempts to fuse decolonial thought and critical Black studies with literature on US foreign policy.

The book is divided into multiple sections. Chapter One stands alone as a brief historical overview of US-Venezuelan relations during the Cold War (where Venezuela served as a kind of regional model of capitalist development) through the Chávez years (where democracy assistance programs became increasingly funded, which helped funnel significant resources into the opposition to Chávez). From his starting point where he states that "[d]emocracy assistance, and democracy promotion, more broadly, have largely flown under the radar of most sociologists" (47), Chapters Two and Three contain Gill's major theoretical contribution in which he develops an innovative framework rooted in sociology but with important interjections from outside the discipline, specifically citing intellectuals of the colonized and neo-colonized world. As a historian by training, I felt this section dragged somewhat with its frequent quotations of other thinkers, as well as points that could have been summarized more succinctly, but it certainly does a great job of explaining a wide swath of literature to readers who may not be familiar with what Gill refers to as the "neo-Tocquevillian" perspective in political sociology, as well as the "neo-Marxist" position. Gill complicates both by mobilizing the literature previously mentioned by Du Bois, Said, and Quijano to show

how now only the United States' supposed interest in democracy promotion and the rule of law (the "neo-Tocquevillian" perspective), or the class interests of a global bourgeoisie and their counterparts in the Global South (the "neo-Marxian" perspectives), can adequately explain the motivation of US state actors. Rather, he links the dynamics of "democracy promotion" that supported the 2002 coup with "a continuing history of paternalistic and neocolonialist US foreign policymaking, which involves the depiction of Latin American leaders as uncivilized, anti-democratic, and unfit to govern over its citizens should they veer from liberal democratic politics and reject US global leadership." Furthermore, his analysis "centralizes these racist-imperialist dimensions of US foreign policymaking that date back to the inception of the US government as an independent entity" (70). Thus, he suggests that the construction of colonial otherness, in its racialized and paternalistic dimensions, is an important technology of power which not only functions as propaganda but actively informs the framework of US policymakers and the architects of democracy promotion, even and especially when they behave in un-democratic ways. While this territory has been arguably covered in other works (those by Greg Grandin, Eva Golinger, Julian Go, Donald Kinsburg, and George Ciccariello-Maher, to name a few), what makes Gill's intervention important is his carefully gathered source material which gives us a unique backseat view to the often murky world of US democracy promotion (which, although funded by taxpayer money, is often inaccessible to the general public). These sources are made evident throughout the rest of the book. Chapters Four through Eight detail the massive network of US democracy assistance programs in Venezuela, whose profound reach and funding I believe will be surprising even to those critical of United States foreign policy. Indeed, reading the endless accounts of trainings, strategizing sessions, and communal assistance programs organized by the Venezuelan opposition with US taxpayer money may provoke one to appreciate Chavismo's resilience, since—as Gill points out—the election monitoring programs that the NDI funded ironically served to solidify Chávez's legitimacy in his nearly unbroken streak of victorious elections.

Some of the most interesting discussion comes in Chapter Nine, when the focus moves from United States programming to the decisions of Venezuela's legislature itself. Venezuela's changing geopolitical priorities serve as a framework for understanding the state's actions as it contemplated the Law on International Cooperation (LIC) which targeted US-funded NGOs. As is the general thrust of the work, Gill takes issue with "classical political sociological theories" that foreground the

composition of government and the populace to make sense of passed legislation (192). Gill notes that neither pluralist (Dahl, Polsby) nor neo-Marxist sociology (Ralph Miliband) are capable of “mov[ing] an analysis of the legislation formation process in contemporary Venezuela very far” (192-3). Although Chavistas have dominated state institutions since 2000, legislation that prohibited (or complicated) foreign funding for NGOs operating in Venezuela was only passed in 2010, after being withdrawn from discussion a few years earlier in 2006. Gill suggests that the decision to pass the LIC depended not on the composition of state institutions but rather on a shifting global alignment of power, which Venezuelan state officials took advantage of to “produce a ‘great wall’ against US hegemony and help to create a new multipolar global order that would counteract its influence” (197). Gill’s foregrounding of geopolitical considerations, foreign policy, and decolonial analysis are all part of his larger methodology, which upends assumptions in traditional sociology to expand its explanatory power and help us better understand the motivation of political actors and the actual operation of power of democracy promotion institutions in both Venezuela and the United States.

There are times, however, when this gesture can damage the book’s narrative and its explanatory power of US activity in Venezuela. Gill’s emphasis on the paternalistic aspects of US democracy promotion is welcome and important but can border on reductive when he misses opportunities for alternative analyses which would enrich our understanding of the strategy of US empire. For instance, in a revealing cable from 2006, ambassador William Brownfield described USAID/OTI’s programming during the post-referendum period in Venezuela as “1) Strengthening Democratic Institutions, 2) Penetrating Chavez’ Political Base, 3) Dividing Chavismo, 4) Protecting Vital US business, and 5) Isolating Chavez Internationally [*sic*]” (181). In particular, US strategies to divide Chávez’s base would have benefitted from some unpacking by Gill. There are moments when the interviews he conducts with opposition organizers and USAID/OTI employees explicitly mention this strategy, but it remains unanalyzed. One OTI employee told Gill, for instance, that they worked with individuals from the opposition party to develop “new NGOs that were looking very neutral in the eyes of the [Chávez] government, by them we can help people in the poor neighborhoods. They looked neutral by them because they had no affiliation with no political party... They were pulling people away from Chave in subtle manner” (183). Instead of unpacking these machinations and the conscious counter-hegemonic maneuvering of the US colonial apparatus among Chávez’s base, Gill frequently falls back on his

theoretical framework to emphasize, in this case, how to OTI was motivated “to show Venezuelans how to properly engage in democratic processes and what individuals they should appropriately select to run their country “(182)—that is, by paternalism. Here, I suggest that an invocation of the theories of Antonio Gramsci (which Gill does reference earlier) would have been useful to help the reader think through other interpretive frameworks to understand US democracy assistance programs and their strategic orientation in the Global South and Latin America.

Gill’s repeated insistence on the US paternalism present in its foreign policy is not without merit, however. He convincingly demonstrates, oftentimes through their own words, the condensing logic of US democracy planners whose opinions on Chávez and the Venezuelan electorate is marked by a racialized logic that truly believes their political and intellectual “backwardness” is the root of the electorate’s desire for Bolivarian socialism. This is to say, even when, at times, the argument feels overstated or overshadows other important interpretive possibilities, it is still a very much needed contribution to the existing literature. *Encountering US Empire in Socialist Venezuela* would be an excellent work in a political sociology course for undergraduates or a Latin American graduate seminar, but it also is an important work for the general public in both the United States and abroad. As Morena in Mexico and other governments in Latin America increasingly lambaste the hypocrisy apparent in US democracy promotion (especially considering the recent outrage in the US media with respect to Russian interference in its own elections), this book is needed more than ever to fight against historical amnesia. It does so by presenting a convincing, well-researched argument at how US taxpayer resources fund oppositional organizations and coups d’état in Latin America through democracy assistance programs, with little debate or oversight. Equally importantly, Gill provides new theoretical models to do so. One can only hope for a Spanish language edition.