



Vol. 9, No. 2, Winter 2012, 478-484  
[www.ncsu.edu/acontracorriente](http://www.ncsu.edu/acontracorriente)

### **Review/Reseña**

Ponniah, Thomas and Jonathan Eastwood, eds. *The Revolution in Venezuela: Social and Political Change Under Chávez*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ David Rockefeller, 2011.

### **Venezuela Under Chávez**

**Marc Becker**

Truman State University

Hugo Chávez is one of the most polarizing figures in Latin America, and that divisiveness has a dramatic influence on the literature on current Venezuelan politics. Similar to heated debates in Caracas' Plaza Bolívar, scholars on opposite sides of an ideological divide often talk past each other rather than engaging those with differing views. The result is contrasting and seemingly incongruent images of the Venezuelan leader and the broader political process playing out in that country as alternatively manna from heaven or an unequivocal evil that escaped from the gates of hell.

Thomas Ponniah and Jonathan Eastwood's edited volume *The Revolution in Venezuela: Social and Political Change Under Chávez* is an admirable attempt to bridge that divisive discursive divide. Although the authors assume a diverse range of viewpoints, the book is not constructed in terms of contrasting perspectives on Chávez's Venezuela that reduces complex political issues to a simplistic binary of supporting and opposing positions. Pronounced perspectives emerge most clearly in the chapters by political scientist Javier Corrales who can find nothing good to say about Chávez and economist Mark Weisbrot who finds rainbows in what might otherwise be seen as dismal economic news. Other authors likewise do not shy away from taking explicit positions on the Chávez government, but their views cannot easily be laid out on a continuum from support to opposition. Rather, they approach the Bolivarian Revolution from many different perspectives, often resulting in contradictory statements and conclusions. The value in the book is not its multiple perspectives on Venezuela, but rather in how it challenges assumptions and raises new perspectives on Latin America's turn to the left. As an entirety, the book succeeds admirably in engaging in a deeper and more sophisticated conversation of the significance and meaning of the changes taking place in Venezuela under Chávez's presidency.

Key issues that the essays in this volume engage are whether the changes taking place in Venezuela are revolutionary, and what exactly does revolution mean. Co-editor Thomas Ponniah contends that what is happening in Venezuela is transformative in terms of how we think about revolutions. While the right is committed to hierarchies and systems of inequality, the left is based on principles of egalitarianism. Ponniah points to three interconnected aspects: redistributive networks, identity politics, and new forms of representation in helping to bridge historic divisions on the left. The result is not a rebirth of radical populism, but the creation of new and experimental forms of democracy.

In contrast, sociologist Jonathan Eastwood questions whether there have been significant changes in class structures in Venezuela. From a marxist perspective, continuities in class structures raise questions about whether the changes can be seen as truly revolutionary. Furthermore, as

Eastwood notes, alterations in discourse alone do not make for a revolution, particularly when the discourse relies on nationalist appeals typical of twentieth-century populist politicians. Rather than resorting to a traditional marxist language of a proletariat opposed to the bourgeoisie, Chávez embraced instead a populist discourse of an ill-defined “pueblo” fighting the oligarchy. Most fundamentally, have the transformations in Venezuela been systemic and progressive? Eastwood points to economic improvements in Venezuela, but asks whether they can be considered exceptional when viewed from a broader historical or regional perspective. Eastwood raises the important question whether seemingly positive gains such as poverty reduction a result of or whether they occur in spite of Chávez’s policies.

Eastwood defines two key tensions that run through Venezuela’s efforts to implement social changes. First is the tension between an oil-based economy and the goals of reductions in poverty and income inequality, with questions of whether Chávez will simply replicate previous problems facing an economy based on resource extraction in what some have referred to as the “resource curse.” The second tension is broadly between participatory democracy and an authoritarian clientelism. Is the government truly interested in empowering the masses, or does it engage in handouts that are designed to manipulate public opinion in order to entrench Chávez’s control over the country? In many ways, an author’s response to this question of whose interests do policies benefit defines ideological attitudes toward the Chávez government.

The authors in this volume present competing perspectives on the root causes of polarization in Venezuela. Anthropologist Fernando Coronil presents a sophisticated analysis that locates polarization in the context of a global crisis of modernity. Examining the failed April 2002 coup attempt, Coronil notes that the point of polarizing discourses was not to raise the level of debate but instead to mobilize people to support a particular political position. Javier Corrales observes that no consensus exists on the causes of polarization, and proceeds to employ a range of approaches (structuralism, historic institutionalism, constructivism, and rational choice) to understand this development. Corrales claims that Chávez

embraced polarizing discourse because of its initial political payoffs, and continued to engage in radicalized politics because of momentum rather than an ideological commitment to that agenda. In contrast, sociologist Gregory Wilpert points to elite resistance to Chávez's reforms as central to a growth of polarization. Viewing polarization through an economic lens, Weisbrot contends that while these oppositional politics may cause inflation this will not be a concern as long as Chávez is able to maintain high growth rates.

Both political scientist Jennifer McCoy, who worked with the Carter Center, and Condoleezza Rice, who served as secretary of state under the George W. Bush administration, have criticized the unraveling of representative democracy in Venezuela. Their perspectives represent wealthy and powerful economic and political interests that were undermined by increased popular participation over policies that influenced their daily lives. Instead of following their lead, Wilpert frames his discussion of the tensions between representative and participatory democracy in the context of a history of growing discontent with a political system that was designed to narrow the base of popular participation and limit involvement to two similar parties that represented oligarchical interests. Wilpert examines a series of mechanisms that emerged under Chávez to increase popular participation in government policies. The most significant policies drew on participatory budgeting mechanisms that Brazil's Workers Party (PT) first implemented in Porto Alegre. In Venezuela, the government created communal councils and cooperatives that sought to redirect more resources to a local level. Other essays expand on these ideas of participatory democracy. For example, Carles Muntaner, Haejoo Chung, Qamar Mahmood, and Francisco Armada note that Venezuela's advances in health care, which many point to as a crowning achievement of the revolutionary process, are grounded in the ideals of participatory democracy.

Although Wilpert is closely associated with the revolutionary process in Venezuela (he founded the pro-Chávez website [venezuelanalysis.com](http://venezuelanalysis.com) and some of his close family members are members of the government), a strength of his writing is that he never hesitates to

criticize what he views as governmental shortcomings. In particular with participatory democracy, Wilpert cautions against the dangers of an encroaching patronage and clientelism that can lead to conflicts with a personalized, authoritarian state bureaucracy. Furthermore, dedicated activists face burnout from meeting overload, as participatory governmental systems require heightened levels of political engagement that translate into notable time demands. Nevertheless, it is not insignificant that as Venezuela moves from a representative to a participatory system popular satisfaction with democracy increases, an indication that Wilpert uses to argue that the government must be doing something right.

Cathy Rakowski and Gioconda Espina contribute a feminist analysis of the Bolivarian Revolution. Despite symbolic advances including the inclusion of gender-neutral language in the constitution and legislation that extends social security benefits to housewives, Rakowski and Espina challenge assumptions that the revolution is feminist. They criticize Chávez and his close allies such as María León and Nora Castañeda for taking credit for much longer social processes, and point to the gains in the 1999 constitution as a culmination of feminist demands that date back to 1936. Furthermore, despite its apparent gains in some realms the constitution remains largely silent on other issues including abortion and gay and lesbian rights. The government has also faced difficulties in implementing policies, although whether this is due to a lack of political will, outright opposition, or bureaucratic incompetence remains unclear. Rakowski and Espina contest Chávez's presentation of himself as a feminist and his proclamation that the revolution is feminist because of how it denies autonomy and agency to independent women's organizations. For those who study the history of middle-class feminist movements in Latin America, complaints of subjugating women's issues to a socialist revolution will sound familiar. As Rakowski and Espina acknowledge, poor people respond better to race and class issues than to feminist demands. Although the authors fail to acknowledge this dynamic, what we have here is not an issue of a hierarchy of oppressions or conflicting forms of identity, but rather how an author's class position in society can influence their

interpretations. Historically we see the political left and subaltern classes deeply committed to women's empowerment and liberation, but their demands and institutional interests are rarely the same as those of the bourgeoisie.

Other inherent contradictions in Venezuela's revolutionary process also emerge in these essays. In examining health care, Muntaner, Chung, Mahmood, and Armada note that public satisfaction with these programs is so high that members of the conservative oligarchy make use of them even though they are ideologically opposed to their existence. In an examination of Chávez's foreign policy, political scientist Mark Williams argues that the country's policy objectives are similar to those of the United States: promotion of regional integration, building trade alliances, and strengthening relations with allies. Although Williams points to Chávez as the most significant ideological challenge to United States hegemony since the 1959 Cuban revolution, he still views Venezuela through a liberal cold war lens as he encourages the Obama administration to implement policies that would blunt Chávez's policy objectives and bolster the image of the United States.

*The Revolution in Venezuela* is not an introductory text to an important and complex topic. Those seeking a basic overview will be better served by Greg Wilpert's *Changing Venezuela by Taking Power: The History and Policies of the Chavez Government* (London: Verso, 2007) or Richard Gott's *Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution* (London: Verso, 2005). Nor is this a comprehensive and exhaustive treatment of Venezuela under Chávez. Despite its impressive breadth, important issues remain unaddressed including environmental issues, indigenous peoples, agrarian reform, and food security and sovereignty. Rather than a shortcoming, these apparent gaps point to important work that remains to be done. Despite a seeming plethora of recent publications on Venezuela, many topics have not received the attention they deserve.

Nor have Ponniah and Eastwood designed this volume to underscore and reify existing attitudes toward the political process underway in Venezuela. Few people will turn to this volume as a bully pulpit to advance their existing ideological assumptions. The essays are too

thoughtful and critical to achieve that purpose. Instead, many of the authors do what political scientist Steve Ellner advocated in a 2007 *In These Times* essay: present constructive criticisms of Venezuela's revolutionary project. Arguably, the worst course of action that those on the left could take is to unquestioningly accept a sympathetic government's actions and policy objectives, and to ignore criticism arising from conservatives and other opponents. The presence of unquestioning "yes men" creates an echo chamber that does not allow for the correction of serious shortcomings and errors. In creating spaces for civil and open discourse around a deeply polarized topic, Ponniah and Eastwood have engaged in a fundamentally subversive task of strengthening not only the Bolivarian Revolution but also other pink tide governments in Latin America.