Joe Emersberger and Justin Podur, *Extraordinary Threat: The U.S. Empire, the Media, and Twenty Years of Coup Attempts in Venezuela*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2021. Figures, tables, chronology, index, 327 pp.; hardcover $89, paperback $25, ebook $16.

This well-documented book, which contains 744 endnotes, attempts to demonstrate that US policy toward Venezuela under Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro has been guided by geopolitical considerations at the same time that it displays little respect for democratic norms and national sovereignty. The book's title is somewhat of a mockery of President Obama's 2015 executive order declaring Venezuela an "unusual and extraordinary threat" to US national security.

Part 1 of the book's three parts is titled "Extraordinary Myths (Advanced Versions)" and deals with recent developments involving the sanctions imposed by the Trump administration and its recognition of Juan Guaidó as the nation's legitimate president. Emersberger and Podur argue that the justification for the recognition of Guaidó lost all meaning when, in 2020, he could no longer claim to be president of the National Assembly (AN), which had previously placed him in line for the nation's presidency, since his five-year term as AN deputy expired. The book's longest part is the second, which consists of individual chapters on five regime change schemes engineered by the opposition with support from Washington, beginning with the April 2002 abortive coup. Part 2's title, "Extraordinary Sedition (and Chavismo's Tolerance of It)," lends itself to the authors' argument that both Chávez and Maduro were overly lenient toward major coup plotters, as demonstrated by the "wide ranging amnesty" (149) granted in 2007 to those implicated in the April 2002 coup.

Emersberger and Podur partly blame the *Chavista* leadership for the impunity enjoyed by many of the perpetrators of antigovernment violence. The authors add, however, that the main culprit was a judicial system dominated by nonleftists, including longtime prosecutor-general Luisa Ortega Díaz, whose actions largely explain "why grave crimes against government supporters, and the government itself, went unpunished" (164) and why "the criminal justice system overall . . . remained stacked against poor people" (217). The authors point out that this assessment of the nation's judicial system contradicts the narrative of the mainstream media and many NGOs, which alleged that the courts were "under Chávez's thumb" (165).

Part 3 is titled "Extraordinary Deceit (an Analysis)" and includes chapters on the reporting of *Guardian* journalist Rory Carroll on Venezuela and the declarations of Human Rights Watch, which, according to the authors, are characterized by systematic deceptiveness.

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Surprisingly, most of the book's accusations are directed not at staunch anticommunists like Marco Rubio or at the Trump administration, which implemented the harshest sanctions against Venezuela, but at liberals, moderates, and centrists. These include Bernie Sanders and Michelle Bachelet, the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, and the *New Yorker*, and NGOs, specifically Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the Carter Center. Even when those in this camp did not present overtly false information, they were guilty of "lying by omission" (35). One example is the media's repeated references to Washington's assertion that Guaidó was Venezuela's legitimate president while omitting that "there was never any reasonable grounds for taking seriously" such a claim (35). Another "huge lie of omission" is journalistic articles that make "no mention of U.S. economic sanctions" (44) or, in the case of Bachelet, say "nothing about repeated U.S. military threats" (51). Along similar lines, the authors fault Sanders for criticizing Maduro's alleged refusal to accept humanitarian aid—an accusation that, according to the authors, is without substance—and then being "silent as Trump openly sought to block fuel from reaching Venezuela" (57).

The authors also frequently compare reporting on Venezuela with that on pro-US governments that flagrantly violate human rights. Those articles not only present a relatively balanced view of repressive Washington-aligned regimes by pointing to their allegedly positive features, but downplay the gravity of their antidemocratic behavior. Saudi Arabia, for instance, is "often referred to by the romanticized term 'kingdom'" (222), while Maduro is sometimes branded a dictator. In another example, the authors compare statements by Human Rights Watch (HRW) calling for strengthening the hand of the police force under the repressive Haitian government of Gérard Latortue with HRW's thorough condemnation of the harsh tactics of the National Police under Maduro. Emersberger and Podur are critical of the "mano dura" (216) of Maduro's police (which they contrast unfavorably with Chávez's more lenient approach to crime). They point out, however, that Venezuelan police abuse in low-income communities, which HRW criticized, did not target government adversaries, unlike in the case of Haiti under Latortue.

Emersberger and Podur reject the thesis that Washington's regime change efforts are dictated by Venezuela's importance as an oil producer and instead ascribe US interventionism to geopolitical imperatives. The authors argue that "a direct economic incentive is insufficient" to explain Washington's actions, since the *Chavista* governments "never denied the United States access to its country's oil" (21). They add that Haiti lacks strategic natural resources but "has been repeatedly crushed by U.S. intervention" (22). The book's alternative explanation is Washington's fear that the example posed by the *Chavista* government of an alternative model "could inspire others" (22). The authors' thesis minimizing the importance of petroleum as an explanatory factor runs counter to the discourse of Chávez and Maduro, as well as most *Chavistas*, who highlight Venezuela's status as an oil producer and influential OPEC member as the main explanation for US hostility.

The authors are occasionally critical of the *Chavista* government, but in these cases they contextualize the issues, and in doing so hold Washington responsible

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for the underlying problems. In addition, the authors argue that the term *dictatorship* is incongruent with the gravity of the cases of possible violation of democratic norms that they point to. Thus, for example, the authors suggest that "reasonable arguments" can be made that Maduro should have called an "initiating referendum" for the National Constituent Assembly, given the "sweeping powers" (175) that were conferred on it in 2017. In addition, the authors do not take a pro-Maduro position in their discussion of the "institutional standoff" between the national executive and the opposition-controlled National Assembly after 2015. Nevertheless, these cases were "not enough to warrant [the Venezuelan government] being called a dictatorship or even particularly 'authoritarian'" (156).

An additional criticism is Maduro's handling of the system of exchange controls that, after he assumed power, triggered hyperinflation. The authors, however, contextualize the error: due to opposition-promoted destabilization attempts, "Maduro was inhibited from making changes that could alienate his activist support base" (142). In a criticism of Chávez (that could also apply to Maduro), the authors state, "he could have placed less emphasis on political loyalty and more on technical competence when appointing people to key posts." This error is also contextualized by making reference to "an insurrectionist opposition staunchly backed by a super-power" (202).

US policy toward Venezuela in the twenty-first century has been a failure from all viewpoints. Fundamental questions, such as the motivation behind Washington's actions and the positions assumed by important actors, including the media, NGOs, think tanks, and politicians of all persuasions, are open to debate. This book, which, despite various criticisms of Maduro, is clearly pro-*Chavista*, presents cohesive, empirically based arguments, and in doing so contributes to a much-needed debate on US foreign policy. More studies like this one, anchored in relevant facts, are needed to examine long-held assumptions and help clarify issues without easy answers.

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Carew Boulding and Claudio A. Holzner, *Voice and Inequality: Poverty and Political Participation in Latin American Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Figures, tables, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index, 257 pp.; hardcover $74, ebook.

How frequently do poor citizens in Latin American countries organize, mobilize, and participate in politics, and how do those rates of participation compare to similar

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