

belief sounds too much like a political manifesto. Since Max Weber, social theory has acknowledged the presence and significance of varied and even contradictory aspects of social life such as values, charisma, tradition and rationality. For Weber, not even the very nature of capitalism could be fully grasped without considering religion. Contemporary theories in gender studies, cultural studies, cultural sociology and post-colonial studies, many of which are inspired by Marx, all emphasize the intersection and inseparability of power and culture. Had Blofield not only looked at polls, but done some gender-sensitive qualitative research, she would have found other power structures besides socio-economic inequality operating in this particular policy field.

Still, in spite of its shortcomings, the book provides valuable empirical information and insights about the political and institutional particularities of each country. Moreover, the comparative nature of the study and the analysis of the interplay between local and international actors (from the Vatican and the international religious right to the liberal institutions and domestic feminists) make the book appealing not only to those interested in the specific issues of divorce and abortion, but also to a wider public.

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Steven Ellner and Miguel Tinker Salas (eds.), *Venezuela. Hugo Chavez and the Decline of an 'Exceptional Democracy'* (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2007) pp. xvi + 220, £45.00, £15.99, pb; €70.88, €25.18, pb.

The 'exceptionalism' thesis with which this work is ostensibly concerned claims that Venezuela is unique within Latin America, due mainly to its oil resources. It is true that Venezuela is – even after a significant relative decline over the past quarter century – one of the wealthier Latin American countries, though by no means the wealthiest. Venezuela also avoided the 'bureaucratic authoritarian' experience of military dictatorship in the 1960s and 1970s. Some scholars saw Venezuela's own political settlement at Punto Fijo, for a time at least, as a possible model for the rest of the region. In the last few years, moreover, high oil revenues have facilitated, though they do not wholly explain, the policy autonomy of the Chavez government and its ability to lead a kind of anti-US alliance in the region. However, if one is to undertake a major study of Venezuelan exceptionalism, then some kind of comparative perspective seems essential. That is not really visible in this work. The chapter by Lander contains a few scattered references to the contrasting experience of Chile – a country which is also commodity-dependent but different from Venezuela in almost every other conceivable way – but there is little attempt at systematic comparison with any other Latin American country.

The other part of the title involves Hugo Chavez, and this is what the volume is in fact mainly about. The majority of the chapters are taken up with discussion of different aspects of the Chavez experience. There are two articles about the oil industry – although one of these, written to a reasonably good standard by Miguel Tinker Salas, deals mostly with the pre-1998 period. There is also a detailed chapter on labour and trade union politics under Chavez, and a rather sketchier – though in

some ways more interesting – chapter on ethnicity and racism in Venezuela. There are also two chapters on social movements under Chavez. One of these, by Cristobal Valencia Ramirez, attempts to understand better the bases of Chavista support and concludes that this is actually quite heterogeneous and involves some quite sophisticated political actors. Chavista activists are far from being the mob sometimes portrayed by the opposition. Then there is a detailed chapter by Daniel Hellinger on electoral politics in Venezuela dealing largely but not exclusively with the 2004 recall referendum. The book concludes with a chapter by Christopher Clement on US policy toward Venezuela under Chavez. The tone of all of the chapters is generally supportive of Chavez, though this is not an uncritical hagiography and the academic standard is generally reasonable.

The strengths and weaknesses of the collection tend to mirror that of the subject matter. The sociology and history in the book are generally illuminating, while the economic discussion is limited and in places insufficient. Several chapters try to debunk claims by the opposition that Chavez is essentially an authoritarian in democratic guise. The contributors do this, in part, by stressing the autonomy with which a lot of pro-Chavez actors – notably trade unions and social movements – operate and (in Hellinger's case) by analysing seriously some recent electoral contests in Venezuela. The book was, however, in press when the 2006 presidential elections were fought out and these are not discussed. Nevertheless this part of the work is effective in pointing out that critics of Chavez often over-state their case, though it is hard to do more given the lack of data on some key points. How pervasive, for example, is racism in stirring up hatred for Chavez among some of his opponents?

Unfortunately the chapters on oil and the economy do not get far beyond the imperialism vs. anti-imperialism stereotype. It is high time that discussion about the Venezuelan oil industry did so, since the majority of Venezuela's oil surplus has been going to the national government since the late 1950s. It is one thing to assert national control over oil – or indeed any other aspect of an economy – and quite another thing to cope with the complex managerial dilemmas that result. Problems of managing the oil industry go back well before 1998. In fact the 1970s in Venezuela provide a classic example of how a mismanaged oil boom can fail to confer lasting benefit. Will Chavez do better than Perez once did? The three contributors on oil and globalisation issues in the volume are not exactly naive, but they tend to let their 'good guys' vs 'bad guys' approach get in the way of asking the key questions. One problem facing Venezuela is that, under Chavez, there has been insufficient investment to maintain oil production, which has fallen significantly since the end of the 1990s. Moreover the performance of the state company – no doubt due in large part to the 2002–03 strike and subsequent purge – has been so limited that Venezuela needs foreign capital to sustain even such production as it maintains. One can logically be anti-state company or anti-private capital, but there is not much sense in being both. If it were not for the boom in international oil prices, Venezuela would be in deep economic trouble. Even as it is, there are other signs of an unbalanced economy such as shortages and suppressed inflation. It is admittedly true that one of the reasons for higher international oil prices has been successful collective action by producers, for which Chavez deserves some credit. But in the long run 'anti-imperialism' may not be enough.