

Daniel Cieza begins his chapter by noting, as Argentines often do, that ‘as always, the Argentine case is unorthodox’. Specifically, in Argentina ‘a unique, progressive style of “Caesarism” has emerged, aligned with the new Latin American political movements, but with very peculiar characteristics’. In a few well-crafted pages Cieza describes and assesses the neoliberal policies of the Menem/de la Rúa years. They led to the 2001–02 disaster and facilitated the rise of what Cieza labels caesaristic Kirchnerism, which seems much like *chavismo* without as much money. And the resistance? Cieza offers nothing on the weak dissenting role played by Argentina’s once-militant labour movement (for that we can dig out his excellent 1998 NACLA article) and very little about new social actors – only a few sentences on the *piqueteros*.

Steve Ellner begins his chapter on Venezuela with the assertion that Hugo Chávez ‘punctured the Washington Consensus-promoted myth that in the age of globalization any deviation from the standard macroeconomic model was doomed to failure’. As a leading student of Venezuelan politics, Ellner knows that he should have added that major oil exporters, a class by themselves, are free to deviate until their spending grossly outpaces their income (as in Mexico in the early 1980s), and it will be fascinating to see how the current collapse in oil prices affects the apostasy we call *chavismo*. In the meantime, Ellner provides a useful brief guide to Chávez’s movement, but it is an informative chapter in search of a conclusion: ‘As long as the Venezuelan model depends on oil income, its applicability beyond its borders will be limited’, Ellner writes, followed two paragraphs later by a claim that the outcome of the Chávez model ‘is of transcendent importance for the rest of Latin America and the Left worldwide’.

There is no stated conclusion, but readers will deduce one: If Washington is intent upon maintaining its Latin American ‘empire’ by insisting upon traditional neoliberalism – a big ‘if’ about which a chapter would have been welcome – then the level of dissent in today’s Latin America is not sufficient to force Washington to reconsider. That may change, of course, but anyone reading these nine chapters will bet on continuity.

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Günther Maihold (ed.), *Venezuela en retrospectiva: Los pasos hacia el régimen chavista* (Madrid/Frankfurt: Iberoamericana/Vervuert, 2007), pp. 346, € 28.00, pb.

Venezuela has become the focus of an ever-expanding literature on the merits and shortcomings of the Bolivarian revolution. If many hail it as an attempt to redirect the course of history away from the evils of free-market fundamentalism and to blaze a new era of equality, many others, with similar passion, fear it as a long descent into tyranny by the ideologised masses over the forces of reaction, as well as by the government. It is debatable whether the Fifth Republic is a complete break with the past (if there is ever such a thing) or whether it may be more accurately characterised as the interplay between the old and the new, tradition and novelty. Clientelistic networks continue to be entangled with the state apparatus and public resources. Throughout the tumultuous years of Chávez’s presidency, however, a large number of observers both in Venezuela and abroad have been persuaded that the country is on a path of political, economic and cultural transformation. This is

not just a perception; it is embodied in all-too-real demonstrations, behaviours and dynamics in favour of or against the promised new world of Bolivarian socialism.

*Venezuela en retrospectiva* (Venezuela in Retrospective), as its title indicates, attempts to tell the story of *how* Venezuela got into such a critical point in its history. This edited volume, comprising 18 contributors, grew out of a 2004 symposium held at the Berlin-based Ibero-American Institute. Thus, it is mostly a German–Venezuelan affair. Editor Günther Maihold’s opening informs the reader that the framing issue of the volume is the assertion of whether Venezuela’s current regime is indeed new, and *sui generis*, or constitutes yet another version of typical political experiments in Latin America. The question, of course, is a poignant and timely one, but regrettably it is not actually answered, at least coherently, in this volume.

But first, allow me to state the book’s positive features. It does make a broad range of useful thematic contributions that provide insights into Venezuela’s conundrum. The first section is dedicated to the crisis of the political system that facilitated the irruption of anti-system forces and ultimately the ascension of Chávez to power. John Peeler examines the progressive ‘deconsolidation’ of a relatively stable democracy characterised by the failure of both elites and institutions to address the needs and wants of the people; he ends with an (increasingly unlikely) call for an inclusive ‘new pact’ in which *all Venezuelans* are included. In the wake of this well-argued essay, Ricardo Combellas guides the reader through the intricacies of the constitutional overhaul of the country, Thais Maingon provides an overview of the collapse of the party system and the search for new alternatives, and Maihold applies the social-psychological concept of ‘political learning’ to describe the elite’s inability, after the success of the *Punto Fijo* system, to learn from successive crises and adapt to new socio-political developments.

The second section of the book deals with Chávez’s emergence as *the* political actor of Venezuela. This heterogeneous part opens with Friedrich Welsch and María del Pilar Camprubi’s qualitative electoral assessment of Chavez’s successes, with an emphasis on the inherent fragility and volatility of his electoral support – this contention has difficulty in passing the test of time, however. The discussion of the Bolivarian ideology by Andreas Boeckh and Patricia Graf is thoughtful and useful, stressing both its vagueness (which makes it flexible and easy to adapt to changing circumstances) and its roots in the country’s mythology and traditions. Margarita López Maya focuses on the failure of the Venezuelan opposition to put forth a legitimate alternative: it has continuously underestimated Chávez’s support, shown anti-democratic tendencies and lacked a true leader (where is the Hugo Chávez of the opposition, one may ask?). The opposition has also shown a different, pro-democratic face, and new forces (such as students) have emerged, but the bulk of the analysis remains valid.

Aside from Steve Ellner’s article on the impact of the Bolivarian revolution on the labour movement, the remaining chapters have been written against the backdrop of the instability and polarisation of the country. Javier Corrales suggests for the good of democracy a less confrontational (and more collaborative) governmental approach in dealing with the opposition. Miriam Kornblith discusses electoral dynamics and the Bolivarian attempt to transform Venezuela radically, warning about the authoritarian nature of the regime. Akilah Jenga and Russell Crandall briefly lament the socio-political and institutional ‘degradation’ of Chávez’s Venezuela. Finally, the opposition MP Pedro Díaz Blanco proclaims that a new, unified Venezuela can only be built when political messianism is no longer seen by the

population as a solution, but as a perpetuation of the crisis. The ‘ghost’ of populism (or the return of the ghost, never quite gone, always hovering around) is the main focus of the last section. It starts with Marianne Braig’s short theoretical discussion about the age-old tension between populism and democracy and continues with Nikolaus Werz and Simone Winkens’ discussion of the role of the media in legitimising and undermining the Venezuelan president’s charismatic rule. Finally, the book ends with former Venezuelan diplomat Demetrio Boersner’s analysis of the nature and impact of Chávez’s foreign policy. Boersner stresses the gap between the revolutionary rhetoric and the much milder practice, echoing what another diplomat, a former US ambassador to Venezuela, said: ‘pay attention not to what Chávez says but to what he does’.

*Venezuela en retrospectiva* suffers from flaws that are typical of an edited volume. The contributions promote disparate views on Chávez; thus, rather than presenting a homogeneous perspective, the book lacks a clear unifying theme. There is of course no simple formula that will achieve a balance between many contributions, but perhaps a framing chapter providing an analytical structure for the volume would advance the work greatly toward that goal. The introduction, however, lacks an overview of all the chapters. Further, the volume suffers from the absence of a conclusion in which – in light of all the contributions – the purported guiding theme (is the Bolivarian regime new and innovative or old and typical?) is taken head-on. Moreover, the bulk of the book comes from 2004, and some sections have not aged well. For instance, many voices announce throughout the imminent (and unavoidable) failure of the revolution, or the fall of Chávez; these reports of Chávez’s demise have, of course, been greatly exaggerated. A question more relevant and suitable for the contemporary situation is that posed by Boeckh and Graf: do Bolivarianism and its critique of free-market globalisation represent the beginning of a new movement that will be taken up by other governments (p. 172)? In the light of the trendy argument regarding the ‘left turn’ in Latin American politics and in the context of the current upheaval in global capitalism, this question is at the centre of these troubled times.

These objections, however, should not detract from the merits of the book in providing many diverse and useful readings of the roots and the present of a revolution whose participants perceive themselves as the vanguard of a new world order not only for Venezuela and Latin America, but for humanity itself.

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Robert H. Wilson, Peter M. Ward, Peter K. Spink and Victoria E. Rodríguez, with Marta Ferreira Santos Farah, Lawrence S. Graham, Pedro Jacobi, Allison M. Rowland et al., *Governance in the Americas: Decentralization, Democracy, and Subnational Government in Brazil, Mexico, and the USA* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), pp. vii + 337, \$35.00; £28.45, pb.

The literature on decentralisation and subnational governance in Latin America and elsewhere has expanded rapidly over the past decade. Scholars have explored many facets of these two phenomena through both detailed country studies and broader comparative analyses. Not only have we learned a great deal about the specific challenges entailed in subnational governance, but we have also advanced our