Frédérique Langue


In the introduction to *We Created Chávez*, George Ciccariello-Maher asks the following question: Why would radical revolutionary groups in Venezuela support the head of the state apparatus, Hugo Chávez Frias, and the institutional power that he represented? Underlying this question is an assumption that orients the “people’s history” of Venezuelan politics and its revolution that are recounted in the book. For Ciccariello-Maher, one must understand the history that produced these radical collectives—as well as a diverse array of other groups on the left—and their relationship with the state in order to account for perhaps the most polarizing political figure of the twenty-first century. This, then, is not a story of a president. Rather it is a history of those who made his rise, and the Bolivarian Revolution, possible.

The history Ciccariello-Maher sets out to tell is one of “the people’s” struggle against a repressive state apparatus and the punctuated moments of rupture that redefined this struggle. Here the author draws upon Enrique Dussel’s definition of *el pueblo*: a category that is established by the internal frontier that fractures the political community “in which those oppressed within the prevailing political order and those excluded from it intervene to transform the system, in which a victimized part of the community speaks for and attempts to radically change the whole” (p. 8).

Ever since the “unraveling” of representative democracy in Venezuela in 1998, the (in)stability of parties and institutionalized politics has dominated the research on the country. Ciccariello-Maher’s rich history of “the political” sphere outside of the institutional sphere accounts for the Chávez era of politics by decentering Hugo Chávez the individual in that history. Both the narration and organization of the book allow for the story of Chávez to be refracted
through the mobilizations that predated him. But this history also forces us to reconsider the foundation upon which Venezuela’s “exceptional democracy” and institutional stability was erected. Taking the narrative of exceptionalism head on, Ciccariello-Maher demonstrates that the formal democracy founded in 1958 with the Punto Fijo agreement was sustained by systematic state repression and violence that tends to be associated with dictatorship, not democracy. Rather than a turn away from the violence deployed by military dictatorships and the colonial state before it, the consolidation of a polyarchic democracy catalyzed years of grassroots and guerilla struggles that were met with ever-increasing repression (p. 9). By the 1980s, this repression was aimed not only at guerilla fighters but also the poor masses “whose demands [the state] could not meet” (p. 73). These struggles then gave birth to a diversity of groups that would later be linked together through equivalent demands and bonds that condensed around Chávez, creating a shifting and sometimes fragile support base for Chavismo. The book’s chapters cover a constellation of groups and movements (indigenous, informal labor, guerilla, etc.) and capture “moments of rupture,” such as the 1989 Caracazo. These events demonstrate how the actions taken by “the masses” have altered the course of Venezuelan history.

The chapters provide a breathtaking sweep of Venezuelan history and a detailed reference guide to grassroots resistance in Venezuela, constructing a political genealogy of the Bolivarian Revolution. A few chapters, however, seem to serve as vehicles for thematic questions that are woven throughout the book rather than prioritizing the history of the groups to whom the chapters are dedicated. I found this to be the case, for example, in his chapter on women’s organizing. In chapters one and two Ciccariello-Maher goes into exhaustive (almost overwhelming) detail in his narrative of the guerilla movement. But his chapter on women’s movements feels rushed at times, as he gives readers brief descriptions before dedicating the rest of the chapter to discussing the antagonism between gender vs. class politics and autonomy vs. institutionalization.

Furthermore, because Ciccariello-Maher takes the most radical of the Chavistas as his starting point, he errs towards overstating the radicalism of the Chavista base. For example, Ciccariello-Maher states early on in the book that the 1989 Caracazo reveals that the Bolivarian project “rests on a mass base more bent on destroying the state than seizing the state” (p. 18). Yet, many Chavistas in Catia, one of the poor/working-class sectors that Ciccariello-Maher discusses and the area of Caracas where I work, would simply prefer a more effective state presence in their neighborhoods. The security provided by the collectives that Ciccariello-Maher details is revered and respected—even envied—by many outside the territory they control. However, many of those who live in surrounding neighborhoods would most likely opt for the presence of a transparent, non-
abusive, and uncorrupt police force over a community-run security group. This focus also leads Ciccariello-Maher to prioritize the desire for autonomy from the state espoused by community leaders like Carlos Bentacourt, who sees the state as a regulator of popular power. Yet, many participants involved in communal councils and communes desire more support, guidance, and regulation from state institutions rather than autonomy from them.

As a last point, *We Created Chávez* is perhaps the most detailed treatment of what Steve Ellner has called the multiple lefts within the Chávez coalition. And the conceptualization of *el pueblo* as a diverse community held together by its opposition to an enemy (the political and economic elite), rather than by Chávez’s charisma, moves us past simplistic and condescending explanations of populism. Yet, this focus also overlooks how the discourse of “the people” and revolution has drawn new lines within Chavismo. The danger of any discourse emerging from the categories of “us vs. them,” which are by necessity unspecified and vague categories, is that these divisions become a means by which a few gain the power to classify who is “us” and who is “them.” The dissemination of this discourse throughout state institutions, even if only strategic positions have been seized within the state (p. 242), creates a situation where criticisms and alternatives, and their proponents, can be marginalized or expelled as unrevolutionary or bourgeois. This discourse, while suturing the Venezuelan left together, could also operate to suffocate the democratic dynamics within the Bolivarian process.

By the end of the book, the political symbol that is Hugo Chávez has come to represent more than institutional power alone. Instead, we see Chávez as the embodiment of a historical lineage. And it is to this lineage that many of his supporters remain loyal, with their support for him an outgrowth of the decades-long struggles that “created” him. It is impossible to read *We Created Chávez* without wondering who, other than Chávez, might be able to represent, and thus suture together, the diverse and conflicting factions that have come to compose the Chavista support base. The beauty of Ciccariello-Maher’s approach is the way it turns this question on its head, demonstrating the inadequacy of accounts that appeal to individual leaders and constituted power alone in looking for answers.

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In *Embers of the Past* Javier Sanjinés, Professor of Latin American Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of Michigan, examines what he calls the