

## Final Reflections: Understanding the “Revolutionary Petro-State”

It was May 1, 2011. I was standing on the bridge connecting the state-owned Hotel Alba Caracas (formerly Hilton Caracas) and the apartment hotel, Residencias Anauco in Parque Central (Central Park), where many of the Cuban collaborators in government missions and international political guests were living. The bridge is located on the eastern end of Avenida Bolívar, a two-kilometer-long eight-lane motor road connecting the southern end of Parque Central with the tunnels leading to Plaza O’Leary at the eastern end of El Silencio. Avenida Bolívar was filled with people dressed in red as far as the eye could see. Chávez was talking from a stage at the far end of the avenue. I didn’t know it yet, but it would be the last time I saw him alive.

The march had started earlier that morning in Gato Negro, in Catia—a popular neighborhood par excellence. Avenida Sucre, which connects Plaza Sucre at the entrance to Caracas from the motorway Caracas-La Guaira, and to the city center with the presidential palace, was closed off. The Guardia Civil (civil guard) was directing traffic and the crowds that were pouring in from all the connecting streets. I had arrived by motor bike along with a friend. I wanted to take pictures and needed to be able to move quickly in order to find good shots. People had already started to march toward Avenida Bolívar and we trawled between the crowds alongside the road. *Caraqueños* are used to motorbikes; they move slowly (sometimes not at all) at the sound of a honk without even stopping their conversations. The marchers were carrying posters and banners



**Photo 11.1** March and public meeting with President Chávez in Avenida Bolívar, May 1, 2011. Photo by the author

reading: “Female workers constructing socialism!” “For those who want patria, let’s go with Chávez!” “The revolution vindicates the Venezuelan working class. Long live the Revolution!” “Mothers from San Juan,” “FETRAELEC. Workers’ Control,” “PDVSA oil workers fighting tooth and nail. Fatherland, socialism or death, we will win!” Someone had made a giant inflatable balloon portraying the globe, featuring a white arm and a black arm embracing South America, and the communist insignia hammer and sickle hovering over the North Pole. A man was holding a large hand-written poster saying: “The revolution is carried in the heart to die for her and not in the mouth to live off her.” A group of oil workers with red helmets on their heads were playing drums. A giant sound system on the back of a truck filled the air with revolutionary jingles, while a group of women, dressed in traditional Venezuelan costumes, danced in the middle of the march. The air was filled with music, shouting and laughter as the

crowd moved slowly toward Avenida Bolívar where Chávez a few hours later would enter the stage.

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Over the years, I had participated in many mass gatherings just like this one. Pre-electoral rallies, post-electoral celebrations, May 1, commemorations of the defeat of the 2002 coup. Giant marches and celebrations filling the western city center with men, women and children of all ages, dressed in red, carrying posters and banners, dolls or art work. Street vendors selling food and drinks, bottles passing around, and revolutionary music blasting out on stages, loudspeakers and giant television screens. Often many hours would pass before Chávez actually appeared, but that did not matter. People chatted with family and friends, meeting old political allies and making new ones. When Chávez finally arrived a giant roar would fill the air, and people calmed down to hear him talk. However, as his speeches tended to be long, they quickly resumed talking as they listened. When his voice reached a crescendo to underline a point, people cheered, whistled and shouted comments of support, occasionally breaking out in collective chanting of political slogans.

This vignette represents, in many ways, the incarnation of a populist rally, the perfect aesthetics of a popular revolution uniting *el pueblo* and the state. Javier Auyero’s much acclaimed monograph *Poor People’s Politics. Peronist Survival Networks and the Legacy of Evita* (2000) opens with a similar epigraph from a Peronist march in Argentina celebrating Perón’s birthday. As he argues, the marches only represent a small part of the overall “set of material practices and symbolic constructions that constitute [Peronisms] organizing principles” (Auyero 2001:207). Auyero succinctly illustrates that the political practices and representations of Peronism must be understood in the context in which they are lived; as the product and everyday re-production of a political idea as much as a political party structure, grounded in structural inequalities, socio-cultural politics of difference, social relationships, and real-life needs. Toward the end of his account, Auyero makes reference to a reflection made by Wacquant:

The *intellectual bias* which entices us to construe to world as a *spectacle*, as a set of significations to be interpreted rather than as *concrete problems to be solved practically*, is more profound and more distorting than those rooted in the social origins and locations of the analysis in the academic field, because

it can lead us to miss entirely the *differentia specifica* of the logic of practice. (Auyero 2001:207, emphasis in original)

The warning against construing the world as a spectacle that this quote alludes to is pertinent to our context. The symbolic universe uniting the popular sectors and Chávez was indeed often spectacular. Chávez’s charismatic qualities accentuated his symbol-laden rhetoric, his allusions to national icons, historical genesis and destined future, and his invocations of grand visions that were to be materialized through the unity of the state and el pueblo. Symbolic dramaturgy and material change were tied together, forming part of what I, in this book, have called a Bolivarian space. This space was a political, ideological and social universe uniting the Chávez government and its supporters, carved out of the backbone of a dense political narrative portraying the Bolivarian process as the historical moment of vindication for Venezuela’s marginalized people. These are the most obvious surface expressions of Chávez’s rule, those that could be publicly observed and critically dissected, framed through a photogenic political snapshot epitomized by crowds dressed in red collectively cheering Chávez’s flamboyant speeches.

However, throughout this book, I have sought to go beyond this surface image. My aim has been to gain a deeper understanding not only of the historical background and political processes leading to Chávez’s rise to power and subsequent enormous popularity among his supporters, but more importantly, the social histories, political agencies and lived experiences emerging from within the popular sectors that accompanied him throughout his rule. As I argued, if we want to gain a proper understanding of the form, expressions and evolution of the Bolivarian process we need to understand Venezuelan history, both in the past and in the present, through the lens of the popular sectors. At the time of Chávez’s rise to power, the Venezuelan political and economic system was severely exhausted and stripped of legitimacy. Contra-factual history could surely have provided a range of different scenarios of what would have happened if Chávez hadn’t been the person to seize power at such a schismatic moment. However, it was Chávez who arrived on the political scene at this juncture in Venezuelan history, representing, to paraphrase Victor Hugo, an idea whose time had come. This historical convergence would not only create paradigmatic shifts in Venezuela, but also leave its mark on the Latin American political landscape at large.

## UNDERSTANDING IDEOLOGY

Throughout this book, I have sketched out a broad picture of historical interpretations and identity politics, ideologies and worldviews as conceptualized from the point of view of popular sector activists. Recognizing the plasticity of historical interpretations, I have strived to connect these *emic* articulations to broader historical trajectories, processes and structures, showing how dominant history and ideology are diverging from those emerging from subalternity. Unfamiliar worldviews and ideologies may often seem incomprehensible to external observers. However, as Nugent notes:

The conditions according to which the organization by people of material and social relationships may be formulated differently (re-cognized) over time means that [the] concept of ideology articulates a fundamentally historical phenomenon, revealing growing contradictions in social relations. (Nugent 1993:36)

Thus, the diverging ideological directions, and indeed worldviews, that have polarized the Venezuelan polity since long back, taking new forms and meaning after Chávez's first electoral victory in 1998, need to be interpreted within a framework that takes into account how social relationships have been intrinsically formed in relation to material and structural configurations of society at large. Different social groups in Venezuela base their identity politics, interest regimes and ideological frameworks on radically different life paths and lifeworlds. Simultaneously, these different features are molded upon a range of shared symbolic and material signifiers. This creates the potential of transcending existing differences, at the same time as the social gulf makes it difficult to build comprehension and mutual recognition.

## FISSURES THROUGH HISTORY

As I have shown throughout this book, the Venezuelan polity has been molded by racial- and class-based fissures throughout its entire history as a nation, each political epoch giving different form and significance to the social imaginaries that these differences engender. The end of the oil-smoothed development paradigm in the 1980s, the enactment of neo-liberal reforms as well as violent government responses to popular protests shattered the myth of national unity that had prevailed since Acción

Democrática consolidated its social hegemony in 1959. As Lander notes, the birth of electoral democracy in 1959 had engendered expectations in the populace about imminent social development and national progress (Lander 2005:33).

A “modern” integrated society appeared possible in a not too distant future. A political culture of “national harmony” and its corresponding multiclass political party organization achieved hegemony. The self-image of an inclusive, egalitarian, and racially democratic society became dominant. Optimism prevailed. The thesis of Venezuelan exceptionalism took firm hold. (Lander 2005:26)

The Puntofijismo hegemony was underwritten by habitual “everyday” violence against the poor, violent persecution of radical opposition, as well as skillful containment of organized labor and the peasantry (Ellner 2008; Ciccariello-Maher 2013). On the surface, social harmony prevailed. However, toward the end of the 1970s, this myth started to crack. Poverty and inequalities increased drastically. Historical divisions, and more recent forms of social exclusions that political dominant discourse and imageries had glossed over, started to surface (Lander 2005:26). As Lander states: “An increasingly divided society took shape in Venezuela” (Lander 2005:26), accompanied by an increasing sense of insecurity. The wealthier classes started to build fences and place bars around their living spaces, and the poor started to increasingly become portrayed as “the dangerous classes” in the media (Lander 2005:27), featuring racist overtones that had never been previously uttered in public. Society seemed to fall apart from within:

These processes of exclusion, segregation, and fragmentation led to socio-economic decay—especially in the cities—and to the decomposition of the traditional mechanisms and forms of socialization, particularly the family, school and work. (Lander 2005:27)

Meanwhile, the political classes were increasingly becoming stripped of legitimacy. Not only were they caught up in a range of political scandals and endemic corruption, but the enactment of neoliberal reforms was also by many viewed as a betrayal of national interests and of the very populace. El Caracazo in 1989 dealt the final blow to the imagery of national harmony. Not only had racial- and class-based tensions become a public

truth, but the state's readiness to maintain its control through the use of force made it clear that the popular sectors were collectively viewed as antagonistic to the Venezuelan polity. When Chávez led the attempt to topple Carlos Andrés Pérez in 1992, the coup was widely perceived by the popular classes and beyond as a legitimate means to dispose of a political system and ruling class that had exhausted its legitimacy.

As I have suggested throughout this book, it is paramount to understand this prolonged socio-political drama not only as the origin of the profound polarization and social antagonisms in Venezuelan society, but also as constitutive of the ways in which the Bolivarian process gradually became cast as a political crusade aimed at restoring national dignity and sovereignty through founding a new moral, social and political order. Significantly, the popular classes, who not only had borne the main burden of the socio-economic crisis but had also been cast as the nation's "others," became within the Bolivarian process cast as *el pueblo soberano*, a synthesis of the refounding of the nation and the redemption of its people.

As Lander (2005) notes, this discourse was radically and divergently interpreted by different social groups. For the upper and middle classes, as well as for many of the country's intellectuals, who were oriented toward "consumption patterns, value orientations, and enjoyment of the 'modern' global good life" (Lander 2005:33), this discourse was alienating. Indeed, the Bolivarian political orientation—away from Westernized imageries of modernity, Western political alliances as well as its allusions to nationalism—was interpreted as "an anachronism in a globalizing world, a return to unfeasible and historically Third World postures" (Lander 2005:33). For the poor however, the reorientation toward traditional and popular Venezuela, the reinterpretation of the nation's founding myth, and a pledge of solidarity to other Third World countries and oppressed peoples became a pathway into a process of "cultural decolonialization" (Lander 2005:34). At the same time, it became an ideological and social platform for their political integration into the state and nation body.

### VENEZUELA'S RISE AND FALL

It is vital to comprehend this socio-political genealogy not as a process confined to national dynamics alone, but rather as constitutive of broader processes of post-colonial state formations and configurations of global

capitalism in the twentieth century. The formation of the Venezuelan state and political economy was essentially a product of its position as a resource-exporting country (Coronil 1997; Karl 1997). Indeed, the Venezuelan state came into being as an entity, real and imagined, through this very process:

It was only when it was transformed into a mediator between the nation and foreign oil companies that the state acquired the capacity and financial resources that enabled it to appear as an independent agent capable of imposing its domination over society. (Coronil 1997:4)

Yet, this process was more than a question of political state-making. Through the nation's entanglement into the global production of center-periphery relations, Venezuela became a site of convergence for locally appropriated ideas of modernity and progress molded upon Western notions of universal progress. As Coronil (1997) notes:

I have tried to keep in mind that the process of state formation in Venezuela is part of a global project of modernity that claims for itself a singular universality, rationality, and morality that depends in the subordination, exclusion or destruction of alternative forms of sociality, rationality, and values. (Coronil 1997:17)

This perspective is important to capture in order to appreciate the deeper script behind the rise and fall of the Venezuelan dream for the future in the latter part of the twentieth century—and indeed the imagery of the Venezuelan nation-state. As for Zambia's copper belt, succinctly analyzed by Ferguson (1999), the rise to modernity and progress for the nation and its people alike seemed to be so close during the heydays of developmentalist optimism in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet, this bubble of optimism was founded on structural fragility and illusions of national independence. Venezuela's attempt to make a “great leap” into First World modernity through industrial development and modernization projects were based on mortgaging the nation's oil rents to Western powers in return for loans. As Escobar (1995) has shown, these processes of economic restructuring and loan agreements were part of a broader ideological global process of “a total restructuring of ‘underdeveloped’ countries” (Escobar 1995:4). In terms of *real politik*, this shift was spurred by a “need to expand and deepen the market of U.S.



products abroad, as well as the need to find new sites for the investment of U.S. surplus capital" (Escobar 1995:32). When this bubble burst, Venezuela's peripheral and subordinate status became evident. From then on, the indebted nation was subordinate to the dictums of Western capital interest and development ideologies, mediated through the IMF. It is a paradox of almost epic proportions:

Ironically, a state that was constituted as a national state through its control over petroleum was undone when it used the nation's subsoil to underwrite loans to finance a project of industrial development designed to end the nation's dependence on petroleum. (Coronil 1997:392)

The fall from grace was twofold: not only was the Venezuelan state stripped of its grandeur and illusions of sovereignty in the attempt—however truncated, jagged and inadequately executed—to try to free itself from the grip of oil and to better integrate into the world economy, but this downfall also perpetuated the country's subordination to the point that, in spite of possessing great riches, the space for domestic economic and political maneuvering became even smaller. Over time, Venezuela became a hostage of its own riches, trapped in a global web of exploitative and unequal power relations.

### THE DEVIL'S EXCREMENT

Oil has always been conceived of as Venezuela's Achilles' heel, her nemesis. "We are drowning in the Devil's Excrements." The words were uttered by Juan Pérez Alfonzo, the Venezuelan lawyer, diplomat and politician, minister for mines and hydrocarbons during Betancourt's second government (1959–1964), and one of the founders of OPEC. His words have been repeated over and over again ever since. In 2011, the Venezuelan Central Bank (BCV) reprinted a new edition of Alfonzo's book, first published in 1976, with the same title. Arturo Uslar Pietri, who was the first one to coin the phrase "sow the oil," predicted, since early on, that oil would change and determine everything in Venezuela, leading the country astray on the path of doom:

"Petroleum is the fundamental and basic fact of the Venezuelan destiny. It presents to Venezuela today the most serious national problems that the nation has known in its history. It is like the minotaur of ancient myths, in

the depths of its labyrinth, ravenous and threatening. “The vital historical theme for today’s Venezuela can be no other than the productive combat with the minotaur of petroleum. “Everything else loses significance. Whether the Republic is centralist or federalist. Whether the voters vote white that is, AD] or any other color. Whether they build aqueducts or not. Whether the University is open or not. Whether immigrants come or don’t come. Whether schools are built or not built. Whether workers earn five bolívares or fifteen bolívares. All those issues lack meaning. “Because they are all conditioned, determined, created by petroleum. They are all dependent and transitory. Dependent and transitory. “Petroleum and nothing else is the theme of Venezuela’s contemporary history. (Uslar Pietri 1972, cited in Ewell 1984:61)

In Betancourt’s speech to congress in 1975, as he was presenting the draft for the new Petroleum Law, he opened with the words from E.H. Davenport and S.R. Cooke’s 1923 book *The Oil Trusts and the Anglo-American Relations*: “It is a much disseminated opinion that oil awakes the worst passions, awakes a more devouring greed in the men of business than the passion of Gold, and incites the men of the State to follow Maquiavellian plans”<sup>1</sup> (Betancourt 1975:10, author’s translation from Spanish). When Carlos Andrés Pérez resigned from his second term, he stated that “I raised the hopes of our people and built confidence on our country, but there was too much that I could not do, that I, with all the oil money, could not change” (Karl 1997:72).

It is not only in Venezuela that oil has been imbued with powers of destruction of the minds of men and obstruction of the paths of politics. Oil wealth is surrounded by a distinct mythos (Watts 1999:2); it is an enigma just as much as a material substance. Consider Watts’s (1999) descriptions of one of the inherent characteristic of oil, which he terms Petro-Fetishism/Petro-Magic (the El Dorado effect). By this, he means “oil as a world of illusions. People become wealthy without effort; fabulous wealth and fiscal madness [...]. The ephemerality of money—boom to bust, here today gone tomorrow; wealth which scorches the fingers, signifies the loss of the soul” (Watts 1999:7–8). Oil is associated with criminality, violence, corruption, the crude exercise of power and the destruction of people, nations and nature alike (Watts 1999). “Graft and thuggishness are its defining characteristics. And it is to be expected then that in an age of unprecedented denationalization and market liberalization, the mad scramble to locate the next petrolic El Dorado continues unabated” (Watts 1999:1).

## THE HETEROGENEITY OF RESOURCE WEALTH

The combined political and emotive volatility associated with oil is accentuated in the symbol-laden scholarly concept of the “resource curse,” associated with a historical determination and an inescapable faith, while also being steeped in economistic, macro-oriented and technocratic evaluations of resource management or lack thereof. The theory of the resource curse, which started gaining prominence in the 1980s (Rosser 2006:557), postulates that an abundance of natural resources, rather than promoting social development and economic growth, engenders a host of political and social problems in developing countries. High levels of poverty, civil war, thwarted economic growth, authoritarian rule and high levels of conflict are all characteristics that have been linked to resource wealth (Rosser 2006). However, anthropologists have repeatedly criticized this concept, arguing for the need to seek more subtle and nuanced understanding of social and political processes emerging from resource extraction (see Watts 1999, 2004; Sawyer 2004; Coronil 1997; Mitchell 2011; Logan and McNeish 2012).

In line with this view, I have in this book sought for ethnographically based understandings of the socio-cultural processes and political dynamics that resource wealth engenders. This exploration has been structured around three parallel, but interrelated, lines of inquiry. First, an inquiry into the lives of the popular sectors in the *shadows* of the nation’s oil wealth, cut off both from its material benefits and from the symbols of progress that it engendered. By drawing on collective memories and political narratives from the era of Puntofijismo, I teased out a broad imagery of the escalation of rage and grievances stemming from this symbolic-material deprivation, showing how the underbelly of the Magical State was concretely experienced as suffering, violence and deprivation. Simultaneously, I showed how these experiences engendered a massification of protest from within the popular sectors, paving the way for Chávez’s electoral victory in 1998. Within the Bolivarian discourse, the narrative of social exclusion and marginalization engendered an ideological ethos of the state’s duty to repay its social debts to the poor through the redistribution of the nation’s wealth. These promises were materialized through a range of political reforms and social programs directed to the poor, interlinked with broader ideological notion of popular power and *el pueblo soberano*. Concurrently, policies for political participation as well as other arenas for social mobilization became platforms for a reconfiguration of the rela-

tionship between the popular sectors and the state. Through inquiring into these platforms, I have sought a broader understanding of how the cultural-political emancipation of the formerly marginalized sectors of the population was connected to their claims to finally take part in the nation’s oil wealth.

However, as I have shown, the leap from this political ethos into political realities was fraught with conflicts and tensions. In that process, the state became cast as a battlefield between the old, antagonistic state, to borrow Derham’s (2010) apt formulation, and the vision of a new Bolivarian state capable of converting the ethos of social justice and political participation into reality. The Chávez government inherited a massive state bureaucracy and a state culture that continued to reproduce itself through ingrained social and political practices under the tutelage of a reform-bent government. This illustrates the difficulties of fomenting institutional change at the level of the state, as well as the theoretical fragility of posing a dichotomist divide between “the state” and society at large. The role of the state apparatus as both an instigator and an impediment for political change under the Chávez government must be understood not only as a series of institutional practices and dynamics, but also as the “stickiness” of imageries of the state as a site of power and privileges which through its day-to-day procedures and practices reproduced exclusionary mechanisms vis-à-vis the popular sectors.

At the same time, I have shown how the political ethos of popular power within the Bolivarian space, as well as the concrete policies and reforms accompanying it, opened up what I called a hybrid space of politics from above and politics from below. By drawing on the symbolic repertoire within the Bolivarian discourse and seizing the political opportunity windows emanating from the government, the popular sectors found leverage for including popular agencies, modes of organization and cultural politics into the languages of the state (Blom Hansen and Stepputat 2001). These processes were part and parcel of everyday politics in the interface between the popular and the state. Meetings between state bureaucrats, public functionaries, political figures and community activists were constituted as politically charged arenas where the resilience of state power and historical exclusionary practices were tested and challenged. Importantly, these processes did not reflect a schismatic divide between the inside and the outside of the state. Rather, different interests, ideologies, received

wisdoms and personal ambitions were converging both within and outside the state apparatus, reflecting the real-life messiness of a society in the midst of a process of transformation, as well as the uncertain outcomes of these processes.

Finally, I turned to the historical legacy and the spectacles of oil in different socio-cultural imaginaries, converging in the narratives of the immoralities and destructiveness of Venezuelans' historical experience with extractive capitalism. I showed how the Bolivarian space harbored a profoundly *moral* discourse about the necessity of refounding a social and moral order that was lost to greed, immoral consumption, corruption and social fragmentation, and how these social "vices" were attributed to the ways in which oil wealth was (unequally) distributed and consummated within the socio-political body. Moral personhood and political integrity had been undermined by the triumph of hedonistic rent-seeking, exacerbated by the ways in which Western templates of modernity had become locally absorbed as the conspicuous display of money. These discourses of moralities also played into political polarization at large. Through their support for, and association with, modernity "US style" and the global capitalist system undercutting it, the opposition and their supporters were cast as the "bearers" of this cultural heritage. In turn, these value systems were cast as the anti-thesis to the form of national identity, social transformation and cultural reappreciation of autochthonous socialities and traditions that the Bolivarian process sought to engender.

At the same time, struggles to create a new moral order were hampered from within the popular social body itself. Individualized dreams of consumption, sectarian and personal ambitions and desires for wealth were constantly present in the day-to-day processes of founding a new collective social order revolving around collective consumption at the grassroots level. I have suggested that these tensions reflect the inherent difficulties of fomenting social and political change, and the inherent contradictions of the Bolivarian process itself. Different ideological templates, social practices and political imaginaries were converging in a multitude of sites throughout society, expressed through symbolic as well as material practices in everyday life. This reflects not only the enduring legacy of oil (Tinker Salas 2009). Fundamentally, it also reflects of Venezuela's embeddedness in global economies of capital as well as global economies of desires and wants.

### A DIFFERENT CURSE?

The formation of a Venezuelan oil economy produced a distinct process of class formation; “the middle class grew proportionally larger than the working class: an inverted class pyramid propped up on petro-dollars” (Karl 1997:82–83). This would later determine the political priorities of subsequent governments (toward favoring middle-class and elite interests), the dominant socio-cultural norms and values reflected in “official” society, the untenable growth of the state bureaucracy and the relative limited political attempts to cater to the popular classes. These socio-political patterns proved successful, on the surface at least, until the crisis hit the country in the beginning of the 1980s.

As Coronil has emphasized, a fundamental breach in Venezuelan political trajectories occurred with the liberalization of markets and the rise of financial speculative capitalism in the 1980s (Logan and McNeish 2012:17). This form of economic restructuring took place in many countries in the Global South at the time. However, the particular ways in which it occurred and the ways in which it was socially interpreted in Venezuela were essentially molded by the country’s oil wealth. Not only was the domestic productive economy already gravely underdeveloped (see Karl 1997), exacerbating inclinations to speculation and rent-seeking that had already existed within the political economy for a long time. But the symbolic interpretations attributed to money, wealth and national patrimony produced a new political imaginary of deep fissures between the socio-political national body and the natural body of oil harbored in its soil. In other words, Venezuelans had always known that they were rich. Even the poor had a vague sense of this albeit they perceived oil as something out of their reach. However, a close reading of history and social imaginaries connected to this epoch indicates that the fundamental crisis occurred because, on the one hand, the country was told that it was broke and that “people” had to tighten their belt even more, and on the other, massive amounts of capital were circulating among those who were positioned to grab their loot.

These intertwined processes created a sense of fundamental rupture between the nation’s wealth, the political system and its representatives, and the people. The political leaders were perceived as pillagers, devoid of national sentiments or social responsibility toward their people. As Coronil writes:

Since the traditional elite was implicated in the financial crisis, the [previous distinction between reputable businessmen and unprincipled speculators] became untenable. As a depositor in the Metropolitan Bank who lost his

savings stated bitterly about the trust he had placed in the bank's board of directors: "They were members of the country's business aristocracy. They were the best names. Honest people, people with blue blood." But now he regarded them as people who "don't have a country." As he puts it: their country is money. (Coronil 1997:382)

This quote is extremely powerful because it alludes to a profound sense of deceit. The symbolic bond between the guardians of wealth and its legitimate beneficiaries was ripped apart, only later to appear in Bolivarian discourse as a narrative of betrayal against both the nation and its populace.

As Gledhill notes, "a popular imaginary of the potential link between national resource sovereignty and social justice has had powerful historical effects" (Gledhill 2008:57). The fact that this trope is increasingly at the center of (often violent) negotiations between states and their citizens, indicates that there is a profoundly diverging perception between how oil has been managed, structured and conceptualized through global energy markets and domestic political systems, and the ways in which "the people" vest natural resources with a whole range of socio-cultural properties linking together citizenship, state governance, nationhood, belonging and justice. In essence, natural resources are embedded in a much broader economy of values, subjected to strong emotive reactions and association, including grievances and rage. The contemporary global economic paradigm of high-noon capitalism and accelerated resource extraction does to a very little extent allow these different scales of values into its epistemological frameworks of reference. This is also why the Bolivarian process as well as the so-called Pink Tide harbored a profound contestation of the intertwined *doxa* of resource wealth, liberal democracy and market economy.

Venezuela was in many ways the first country to challenge the hegemony of "there is no alternative" at the level of the state at the turn of the century. I have often wondered why this was the case and whether it was just a historical coincidence or something particular to Venezuela propelling the process of political rupture and change of horizons. Empirically, there might not be a good answer to this question. But on a more philosophical level, I ponder over whether this occurred because Venezuela, more than most other countries, believed so hard it was on the fast-track toward a bright future. Being the best, brightest and most exceptional "pupil" in the Latin American liberal democratic class, the country was praised by foreign leaders, intellectuals, academics and journalists as the exception to the rule of Third World unruliness. Blessed by providence,

Venezuela possessed enormous resources that would guarantee development, prosperity and modernity. When its fall from grace eventually happened, it came hard. And the poor, who had never benefited from the virtues neither of the country’s democratic system nor abundance of wealth, realized that it was very unlikely that they ever would. They were tired of being regarded as collateral damage in a system that both alienated and impoverished them. As Derham (2010) notes about Venezuela as well as other countries steeped in similar conflicts:

After a century or more of experiments with “democracy” and politicians ... the conditions in which the majority has to live are simply unacceptable ... why should they be expected to waste yet another twenty years of their life, waiting for the consolidation of a system that has never worked before? (Derham 2010:278)

It is with this background and with the twist and turns in history that followed that Chávez gained power, and the Bolivarian process gradually took shape, in parallel with the nascent leftist and subaltern political current elsewhere at the continent.

### CHANGING THE QUESTION

Centuries ago, Rousseau wrote: “Do you want the state to be solid? Then make the wealth spread as small as you can; don’t allow rich men or beggars” (Rousseau 2010 [1762]).<sup>2</sup> I suggest that if there is one central issue that can be learned from Venezuelan history of the past 50 years, it is that the country’s trajectories confirm the insight offered by Rousseau. The countries that are often referred to as exceptions to the rule of the so-called resource curse, Canada and Norway, are also the countries that enjoy some of the lowest inequality levels in the world and highest indices of human development. Of course, the reasons for this are as complex as the reasons for why other oil-rich countries have struggled. Fundamentally, these are countries located in the Global North, subjecting them to entirely different development processes, demographic formations, socio-political dynamics and modes of integration into the global (political) economy than those characterizing post-colonial countries.

However, perhaps there is still a deeper lesson to be learned if we manage to reconceptualize the resource curse: that is, not as a matter of wealth, but fundamentally as a matter of unequal distribution of wealth. Posing



the analytical challenge that way we are better equipped to ask new questions and find new answers. The resource curse thesis is often presented as if there were an inherent quality in resource wealth that generated poverty and social inequalities. However, as the first author to associate Venezuela with the term “petro-state” also makes clear in her book: “The question is not whether oil is a blessing or a curse, but rather what specific type of political and economic development trajectory it encourages and whom it benefits” (Karl 1997:235).

As this book has sought to illuminate, inequality in Venezuela is the result of complex dynamics between historical, structural and geo-political trajectories, as well as political priorities and configurations of power and dominance. As Chávez’s time in power showed, this legacy can also be contested and poverty can be significantly reduced over a relatively short period of time. It is thus paramount to recognize that resource wealth does engender great possibilities in reducing poverty—depending on whether there is political will to exploit or create structural opportunity windows.

Nonetheless, as this empirical inquiry into the everyday realities of the Chávez government’s political reforms has suggested, poverty reduction is not at all only a matter of technocratic decision-making processes and policy designs. Rather, it is also interwoven in broader economic, social, cultural, political and institutional dynamics and processes, making it paramount to capture the complexities at play and the frequent un-predictability of its outcomes. As the Venezuelan example clearly shows, efforts to reverse decades or centuries of structural inequalities and entrenched poverty are part of a highly complex and messy “broader whole,” playing not only into political struggles over resources, power and control at large, but also intersecting with culturally contingent political practices and social imaginaries.

Moreover, we need to recognize that “domestic” relations of poverty and opulence, wealth and wants, power and subordination are molded through global processes, responding to global schisms between the winners and losers of the contemporary global political-economic model and the social imaginaries accompanying it. As Coronil notes:

While the international elite moves easily between even more insecure domestic enclaves of privilege and the metropolitan centers, the majority is restricted to an increasingly impoverished social environment palpably marked by abandonment and neglect [...]. The tragedy of modernity is that its promise of universal progress cannot be fulfilled in the terms in which it has been cast. (Coronil 1997:385)

As the example from Venezuela and other countries caught up in struggles over natural resources illustrate, the tangible yet ephemeral qualities of oil make it a “perfect screen” for projecting this “tragedy of modernity” and the structural divisions undercutting it. However, I will reiterate that these structural divisions are not natural, but man-made. Moreover, they are not only political in a narrow sense, but essentially ideological and epistemological.

We therefore have to bring the question of resource wealth together with broader questions about how the hegemonic power inherent to the political economy of capital can be replaced or supplemented with a broader economy of values. Essentially this implies, as was indicated by Escobar (2010), a quest to carve out a vision of alternative modernities or futures which are not founded upon the myth of limitless economic growth; a myth that in its core relies on the myth of limitless extraction of natural resources. If we accept this postulate, it follows that redefining modernity and redefining the production, management and distribution of oil intrinsically constitute two sides of the same coin. As Coronil succinctly states:

Oil has helped mold a highly stratified and ecologically unsound world shaped in the image of disconnected peoples and things that have in common their separation from each other and from the history that engendered them. If modernity is a process characterized by the incessant, obsessive and irreversible transformation of a world splintered into distinct entities, then the effects of an oil production and consumption reflects the spirit of modernity. (Coronil 1997:18)

These insights brings into sharp relief that the challenges that Venezuela has faced and is still facing are not confined to the country alone. Rather, in essence, it is a challenge with global scope, reaching into the essence of how we have organized, molded and imagined our common world for the better part of the last century.

### FINAL AFTERTHOUGHTS

The Venezuela that is explored in this book is very different from the Venezuela of today as I write these words in February 2017. Chávez is dead, the Maduro government has record-low support, the opposition has increased its electoral strength, the political conflict has hardened, the country’s institutional weaknesses have become even more evident, oil prices have fallen drastically, the economy is in shambles, poverty levels

have increased, social indicators have radically worsened, and many grassroots activists have become de-mobilized. In short, Venezuela is a country in deep crisis. The international context is also different. The so-called Pink Tide is by most accounts and measures officially over. In its place, many predict the pendulum with swing toward a right-wing neoliberal model once more, as is already happening in Argentina and Brazil. I have deliberately not made references to the current situation throughout my analysis of the Chávez years in this book, because I wanted to focus on the ethnographic present as it unfolded at the time. However, I believe that the developments in Venezuela after Chávez's death highlight the importance of an analytical focus emphasizing historical continuity and ruptures as I have pursued in this book. In many ways, the thin red lines through Venezuelan history are put into even sharper relief in the current moment. The country's vulnerability in the face of global oil markets and geo-politics, its reliance on oil and imports, the political costs of the historical legacy of playing the political field as a zero-sum game, the continuous absence of a social contract between the nation's different classes, the continuous weak institutionalizing capacity of the Venezuelan state, the continuous politization of public institutions: as Buxton rightly notes, there were a lot of historical continuities that gave cause for concern already during the Chávez years (Buxton 2011:xx–xxi). Seen together, this legacy, in combination with Chávez's death, the political turbulence that followed, the global fall in oil prices and its effects upon the domestic economy, fostered in many ways a perfect storm for which the outcome is yet to be seen. The challenges now facing scholars of Venezuela is to inquire into exactly how these historical and contemporary processes were intertwined and playing out, as well as examining how the Bolivarian process has engendered new social, cultural and political legacies that will shape the country's future development trajectories.

Because of the current crisis, it is tempting to dismiss the political processes in Venezuela in the Chávez epoch as merely “old wine in a new bottle,” as another resource-cursed economic cycle, or as yet another left-ist utopia turned sour. However, if we do so, we are not only committing an academic fallacy in failing to take into account the fine-grained dynamics between historical and time-specific social, economic, political and cultural processes in the course of the Bolivarian process. We are also missing an opportunity to learn something about political struggle and social change more broadly.

As Geertz noted: “Social change will not be hurried and it will not be tamed” (Geertz 2004:578). And if there is one thing that is truly

global at this moment, it is that control over resources, power and politics are increasingly being fought over on a multitude of arenas. In large parts of Europe, young people are now faced with the prospect of being worse off throughout their life time than their parents. The promise of an ever-brighter future—of a fast-track to a prosperous, developed high-modernity—is increasingly fading even in its place of origin. Faced with an aggravated loss of control over their lives and livelihoods and an increasing closure of spaces for de facto democratic influence, people are taking to the street with a combination of anger, resignation and desperation. Only time will tell how these processes will evolve, and toward what that anger, resignation and desperation will be directed. But for that exact reason we should pay close attention to Venezuela. Throughout the past decades they have faced a democratic and economic breakdown spurred by the volatility and supremacy inherent in global capitalist logic and the monopolization of power and resources at both international and national level. Popular rage and protest was followed by the election of Chávez, to a displacement of hegemonic power, aggravated political polarization, and the search of an alternative political horizon and model. This, in the end, did neither prove sustainable nor tenable, and now, as indicated, after Chávez’s death Venezuela has entered into yet another *époque* whose future trajectory and outcome are yet to be seen.

Venezuela’s social and political trajectories are particular to their context and history, but these processes tell us something about how global, national and local processes are intimately intertwined and ultimately inseparable. Anthropologists’ focus on the local, “the human condition, down here on earth” (Lambek 2011:199) is an important and indispensable corrective to the grand political and economic narratives that remove people’s real lives, struggles and hardships from the equation. Our task is to tell the stories about how people, everywhere and all the time, are struggling and trying to shape their own life histories, though often not in conditions of their own choosing, to paraphrase Marx. This book has told such a story, and innumerable similar stories are unfolding in this very moment, right in front of our eyes.

## NOTES

1. This is my translation from Spanish as I was unable to get a hold of the English original. In Spanish the quote reads: “Es una opinión muy difundida que el petróleo despierta las peores pasiones, hace nacer en los hombres

- de negocio una aidez más devoradora que la pasión de Oro e incita a los hombres de Estado a seguir designios maquiavélicos” (Betancourt 1975:10).
2. Social Contract, book 2, ch. 11, footnote 16.

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