

Where Is Venezuela Going?

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***Rethinking Venezuelan Politics: Class, Conflict, and the Chávez Phenomenon*, By Steve Ellner, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2008, 257 pages, \$25 paperback.**

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STEVE ELLNER'S LATEST book, *Rethinking Venezuelan Politics*, is an important contribution to our understanding of Venezuela under Hugo Chávez. It brings a deeply historical perspective to the topic, something almost universally lacking in the growing number of short-sighted texts on the country's politics. It also offers the opportunity for a discussion of the complexities of the "Bolivarian process" as it unfolds.

Ellner has three principal objectives in this work. First, he sets out to challenge the predominant theoretical and analytical frameworks that have characterized recent mainstream writing on Venezuelan politics and history. These works have largely succumbed to a simplistic focus on the personal ambitions of big men and/or discourse analysis, removed from any serious treatment of political economy. Ellner proposes instead to highlight "struggles over issues of substance," especially "political expressions of class and racial cleavages." (1) This is a welcome reorientation.

Also compelling is the author's second aim: to systematically call into question the "Venezuelan exceptionalism thesis" which dominated Venezuelan studies for most of the 20th century. According to this view, "modern Venezuelan history has been exempt from the internecine struggles, acute class conflicts, and racial animosities that have characterized other Latin American countries. For many years, political analysts, along with those close to the circles of power in Washington, presented the exceptionalism view by labelling Venezuela a model democracy due to its stability, marginalization of the left, and avoidance of militant independent trade unionism." (2)

Advocates of the exceptionalist thesis extolled the virtues of the two multiclass centrist parties — Democratic Action (AD) and Committee of Independent Political Electoral Organization (COPEI) — which shared a moderate ideological orientation and alternated power in an exclusionary and elitist "pacted democracy" for most of the second half of the 20th century.

Ellner recognizes that the exceptionalism thesis isn't completely devoid of insights into Venezuelan reality. It is true, for example, that in Venezuela there weren't the class-based parties that developed

in Chile, nor was there brutal authoritarian repression on the scale of the Argentine, Chilean and other dictatorships of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, or counter-insurgent massacres comparable to those of Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua in the 1980s.

At the same time, however, in their enthusiastic embrace of the supposed “social harmony” of Venezuela’s modern period, adherents of exceptionalism missed entirely the rampant electoral fraud in the post-1958 era, and frequently brutal state repression of leftists, guerrillas and labor activists who were excluded from the political system.

Exceptionalism theorists also proved incapable of explaining the ideological struggles within the AD and COPEI. “In both parties,” Ellner points out, “left-leaning factions emerged but were the victims of heavy-handed treatment and violation of internal democratic rules on the part of party machines. The leaders of these factions articulated positions on social inequality, severance of dependency on foreign capital and technology, assertion of an independent foreign policy, and internal democratization.” (3)

The credibility of mainstream analyses was finally tarnished beyond repair over the course of the 1990s as the institutions of pacted democracy utterly collapsed under the weight of popular resistance to neoliberalism. The exceptionalism thesis was unable to predict this institutional and socio-economic crisis, much less how it would provide fertile ground for the electoral rise of left-populist Hugo Chávez in the 1998 elections.

“The basic rationale for the Chavista movement’s drive for power,” according to Ellner, “was that the post-1958 democracy had betrayed national interests, neglected the poor, and was riddled with corruption” (12).

The third principal focus appears later in the book and builds on the historical character of the first two objectives. In these later chapters, Ellner provides a sustained and systematic evaluation of the different phases in the political economy of the Chávez government since 1998, the dynamic interaction between grassroots and top-down initiatives within Chavismo over the same period, and Chávez’s foreign policy.

Much of this is grounded in the information Ellner collected through extensive interviews with both the rank and file and political elite of the Chavista movement.

Political Economy, Class Struggle & Racism

Ellner traces the broad contours of Venezuelan history from the colonial period to the era of pacted democracy in the first half of the book. He places special emphasis on various “struggle[s] for social justice and the related phenomena of class and racial tensions,” long marginalized in the traditional historiography of the country.

The Chávez administration, Ellner explains, has called into question the “bourgeois history” of the country’s mainstream historians and has celebrated long-forgotten historical figures of popular struggle, such as Cipriano Castro, Isaías Medina Angarita, and Luis Bletrán Priet Figueroa. In so doing, Chávez has “encouraged his followers and even many outside his movement to rethink the nation’s past.” (20)

The emergence of new social organizations and movements of indigenous people, blacks, women and other oppressed sectors of Venezuelan society in tandem with the electoral rise of Chávez has reinforced the momentum toward opening up different historical moments for re-examination.

The delineation of four distinct phases of the Chávez administration in Chapter 5 of *Rethinking Venezuelan Politics* is a helpful way to understand the basic radicalizing trajectory of the government, even if it is easy to quibble with the specific characterizations Ellner makes of certain policy developments. A moderate stage (1999-2000) was introduced by Chávez immediately upon taking office. During the presidential campaign of 1997-1998 Chávez and his supporters emphasized the necessity of political reform through the convocation of a constituent assembly, and downplayed specific socioeconomic proposals for change away from neoliberalism.

After the election, 1999 was characterized by political polarization around the new Constituent Assembly. The assembly was carried out successfully and eventually achieved majority support through a referendum. It emphasized participatory and radical democracy in a seeming break with the priority Venezuelan neoliberals had given to technocratic control, elite decision making, and the demobilization and depoliticization of the popular classes over the course of the 1990s.

At the same time, however, Ellner's strong assertion that "Chávez's actions during this period hardly fit into the neoliberal mold" is difficult to sustain on several levels, even if we restrict ourselves to the evidence Ellner himself offers. On the one hand, Ellner can point to the fact that Chávez successfully resisted those in his coalition who advocated "the privatization of the social security system and the aluminum industry," and that the Venezuelan president "substantially increased allocations for social programs beyond the amount that neoliberals would have considered appropriate." (112)

Yet Ellner also points out that Chávez "maintained a dialogue with the private sector and invited numerous businessmen to accompany him on trips abroad," and appointed Martiza Izaguirre as finance minister, the very person "who had occupied the same position under the previous government of Rafael Caldera." (110). He recognizes, too, that other "measures approximating neoliberalism" were implemented, such as "austere fiscal policies, overvaluation of the local currency, and the retention of the neoliberal-inspired value added tax with the aim of avoiding inflation and shoring up international reserves." (112)

Part of the problem here is that Ellner never defines neoliberalism in a coherent fashion. He seems implicitly to adopt the notion that neoliberalism is basically a set of policies which adheres strictly to the commandments of the Washington Consensus — a compilation of policy requisites developed principally by the core imperialist powers and the main international financial institutions in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Others have argued, convincingly in my view, that neoliberalism is more adaptable than any such grouping of policies developed at a particular moment in history.

In fact, as the orthodox neoliberalism of the Washington Consensus began to suffer a major crisis of credibility in Latin America and elsewhere by the end of the 1990s, its advocates made its core policies increasingly flexible in an effort to save the basic project. The political economist Marcus Taylor points out:

"Given that the basis of a new and harmonious society did not emerge spontaneously from neoliberal structural adjustment, the neoliberal project began to explore evermore expansive forms of institutional restructuring in an attempt to consolidate the original project. Without relinquishing its essential emphasis on the rationality of the market as the foremost organizing principal of social life, contemporary neoliberalism has dramatically broadened the scope of its social engineering in order to address its internal contradictions and attempt to mediate the ensuing social conflicts that have sharpened over the last 3 decades." [1]

Part of this effort has been the introduction of targeted anti-poverty programs to prevent the most destitute from perishing, and other similar arrangements. But the class relations and fundamental

ideological premises of neoliberalism persist.

The next stage Ellner identifies is “the anti-neoliberal stage in the context of opposition insurgency, 2001-2004.” This second stage began in November 2001, “when the government enacted a package of 49 special laws, which was designed to reverse the neoliberal trends of the 1990s and which signaled the radicalization of the Chavista movement.” Most important were the laws dealing with the oil industry, fisheries, and agrarian reform: “the expropriation provision of all three laws placed in doubt the sacredness of private property rights and was thus a basic source of concern for the business sector in general.” (112, 113, 114)

After the 49 laws were introduced, the political polarization between Chavistas and the domestic and imperial far-right intensified. U.S. imperial meddling, the principal business organization FEDECAMARAS, and the right-wing trade union federation CTV provoked violent confrontations in downtown Caracas on April 11, 2002, that ultimately led to the infamous military coup of the same day. “FEDECAMARAS president Pedro Carmona headed a provisional government that abolished democratic institutions, abrogated the 49 laws of 2001, and pledged to hold elections only within one year.” (115)

Ellner suggested that divisions within the anti-Chavista camp were the most important variables in undermining the coup almost immediately, whereas other commentators, more convincingly in my view, place more emphasis on the role played by a groundswell of mobilizations by the urban poor in support of Chávez’s return. [2]

“Following the coup,” according to Ellner, “Chávez attempted to reduce tensions by moderating his rhetoric and offering the opposition concessions” (118), even as prominent Trotskyists and others on the far left leveled harsh criticism at the government. The far left essentially took the position that the coupist right within Venezuela would not be appeased by a moderation in Chávez’s rhetoric and the granting of various concessions. The right had acted belligerently in the very recent past in response to what had been 49 quite modestly reformist laws.

Indeed, beginning in December 2002 the right struck again, with an effort to sabotage the economy through an oil lockout. The “strike,” as they called it, proved to be a major strategic failure for the right, as only the industry’s upper-level employees responded to the call to lay down their tools, and the industry was effectively taken over by rank-and-file workers. This was followed by yet another debacle for the right in 2004, as the opposition managed to force a referendum for the recall of Chávez, but then lost decisively as “59 percent of those who went to the polls cast their vote in opposition to Chávez’s recall.” (120)

The right continued to harden its stance and press its demands, but at every turn the counterrevolutionary forces were weakened as workers and the urban poor, those sectors who constitute the base of Chavismo, gained in confidence and self-organization, and sought more and more to pressure Chávez into taking radical positions regarding the economy and redistributive social programs. “This sequence consisting of the intensification of conflict, the exit of moderates, the consolidation of power, and the radicalization of goals has characterized all four stages of the Chávez presidency,” Ellner notes. (139)

Twenty-First Century Socialism?

Between 2004 and 2005, Ellner sees the nascent beginnings of what he defines (vaguely) as “the emergence of the contours of a new economic model,” by which he seems to mean a progressively deeper anti-neoliberal, but not yet anti-capitalist, economic agenda. (121)

After the Chavistas defeated the 2002-2003 oil lockout, and then conquered the congressional elections of December 2005 when the opposition opted for boycott, they had considerably more room for maneuver. Over this period there was an expansion of the various health-and-education-related social programs, called missions; initial experiments with worker cooperatives; and (strictly delimited) co-management initiatives whereby labor had more representation on state company boards, but not workers' control by any stretch of the imagination.

This period also witnessed worker occupations and government expropriations in different industries, tepid but expanding land redistribution, and a distancing of Chávez's cabinet from the influence of organized business interests. Rhetorically, this modest radicalizing trend was accompanied by Chávez's claim that his government was "anti-imperialist" by 2004, and then in favor of an ill-defined "21st century socialism" by 2005.

Finally, a fourth and potentially still more radical stage in Chávez's administration arrived in the wake of his victory in the presidential elections of December 2006 with a dramatic 63% of the popular vote. Chávez quickly "announced new radical measures that promised to carry the 'revolutionary process' to a new level." (127) These measures included the nationalization of the telephone company CANTV and the electricity corporation Electricidad de Caracas, as well as the assertion of still greater state control over the oil industry.

On the political front, the government also "promoted the proliferation of small neighbourhood councils known as consejos comunales (representing between 200 and 400 families) and committed the government to providing each one with about \$60,000 to undertake infrastructural and social projects. In addition, [Chávez] encouraged the creation of organizations representing the community councils at the regional and eventually national levels. By early 2007, about 20,000 consejos comunales had been formed." (128)

At the same time, by mid-2007 Chávez still denied being a "Marxist," was very ambiguous as to the issue of establishing workers' control in the economy generally, and openly opposed to workers' control in "strategic" sectors of the economy such as the oil industry.

Even if Ellner's concepts and differentiation of stages are too loosely defined, he provides probably the best available historical account of the content and character of social policies under Chávez over the course of his time in government. What is more, Ellner, unlike so many other observers on the international left, refuses simply to parrot Chávez rhetoric regarding 21st-century socialism, and actually looks closely at the empirical record. Here is Ellner describing the much-lauded 1999 Constitution:

"Nevertheless, the Constitution is hardly "revolutionary" as it guarantees the rights of private property and an 'opportune and just indemnification' in special cases of expropriation when 'social interests are at stake'" (articles 115 and 116). (142)

"In fact," he writes, "by no stretch of the imagination can Venezuela until now be labeled 'communist' or 'socialist.'" (174)

Internal Currents of Chavismo

Even as enthusiastic a supporter of the Bolivarian process as Michael Lebowitz has never failed to point out the ongoing role played by conservative factions within Chavismo which perpetually threaten the pace and depth of transformative change.

"There is a line from an old Bob Dylan song: 'He not busy being born is busy dying.' In the absence of the advance of the Bolivarian Revolution by the development of protagonistic democracy in the workplace and protagonistic democracy in the community, how different would Venezuela look from capitalism? All that would be needed is to turn to private capital (domestic and foreign) as a growing source of investment and the Revolution would be back in the position it was at the time of the 2001 National Plan, back when Chávez believed in the 'third way.'

"For some, this would not at all be a tragedy. Should we be surprised if, among Chavist leaders, there are some who want — not "Chavism without Chávez," as often charged, but rather "Chávez without socialism"? There are those for whom development of the capabilities and capacities of the masses is not as compelling as the desire for the accumulation of power and comfort for their families. Everyone knows that there are people wearing the red shirt who are opposed to the revolution. Here is the real threat to the Bolivarian Revolution — it's not the private ownership of banks, media, and other parts of the existing capitalist enclave. The threat is from within the Bolivarian Revolution itself." [3]

Ellner broaches this topic most directly in Chapter 6, through an examination of what he terms the "soft-liners" and "hard-liners" within Chavismo. The social forces behind the soft-line include Chavista military officers (who won the governorships in the states of Bolívar, Miranda, Vargas, and Carabobo in the elections of 2004), and the PPT and Podemos parties, who operated within the Chavista coalition until after the publication of Ellner's book.

For the soft-liners, the "overriding task after eight years in power is consolidation of gains rather than further radicalization, which runs the risk of exacerbating polarization and instability and encouraging the international campaign to isolate Venezuela." On this view, "the government's achievements over the last eight years" have been "far reaching and long lasting," and there's little reason to move further.

By contrast, the hard-liners, many of whom "formerly belonged to ex-guerrilla parties (such as the Communist Party, the Liga Socialista, and Ruptura)," advocate "an immediate and unyielding response to the challenges posed by the opposition, the creation of parallel structures, and a purge of the public sector to enhance efficiency and prevent sabotage. The quick succession of events during the first eight years of Chávez's government supports the hard-line thesis that ongoing change and conflict will inexorably lead to new transformations." For hard-liners, "the best defense is an offensive strategy while compromise and fallback positions are a last resort that runs the risk of putting the breaks on the 'revolutionary process.'" (141, 142)

Yet even the hard-liners, according to Ellner, envision the transformative process they desire as being drawn out, potentially over several decades, rather than pushed forward through a faster revolutionary rupture with the status quo. What is more, the new society they envision is only very vaguely defined, obscured in part by the ideological incoherence across both soft- and hard-line factions.

Ellner takes the reader through a very interesting exploration of the distinct views within Chavismo on the labor movement, workers' control, alliances with the "progressive" and "honest" fractions of the national bourgeoisie, private property, the state-run oil industry, and parallel structures promoted by the state.

Most of this is a very rich and nuanced excavation based on extensive interview material. However, there are a few weak components in this analysis. First, unlike Lebowitz, Ellner is not at all clear as to where he stands vis-à-vis the two principal currents within Chavismo. He is therefore unable to clearly articulate the potential consequences of one side losing out to the other.

Second, the labels “soft-line” and “hard-line” are too all-encompassing. It would be more rewarding to learn of the intricate details of the specific ideological origins, and concrete connections between moderates and radicals today and earlier leftist political movements and currents in Venezuela’s recent past. There are glimpses of these connections in Ellner’s text, but they are for the most part underdeveloped.

Third, Ellner’s discussion of the far left, which he somewhat inexplicably defines as being entirely outside of even the “hard-line” of Chavismo, is quite seriously wanting. His discussion is essentially limited to a dismissive reference to the radical trade unionist Orlando Chirino, while the wider significance of revolutionary socialist currents within the labor movement seems greatly underappreciated. [4]

Top-Down versus Grassroots Change

Late in the book, particularly in Chapter 7, Ellner tackles the important debate about the origins of meaningful transformative change emanating “from above” or “from below.”

He suggests that his discussion of the Chávez presidency in this respect “sheds light on the viability of policies, movements, and struggles in developing countries designed to bring about far-reaching transformation and to challenge domination from the north.” For Ellner, Third World struggles for transformative change “have been initiated from ‘above’ and from ‘below:’ by the state and political parties that seek to obtain and retain power (from above) and by social movements and unorganized sectors of the population (from below).” (175)

The strength of this chapter is that Ellner recognizes the role of self-organization and self-activity of the popular classes to a greater degree than elsewhere in the book. He discusses, for example, the way in which polarization beginning in 2001, and intensifying with the 2002 coup, “thrust the rank-and-file Chavistas onto the center stage beginning in 2001 and infused them with a sense of empowerment. In the face of the opposition’s massive mobilizations calling for Chávez’s ouster, the Chavista leadership succeeded in calling out numbers of its supporters onto the streets. Indeed, the Chavista leaders owed their political survival to the rank and file’s favorable response to those calls.” (179)

In the case of the 2002-2003 oil lockout, Ellner highlights the centrality of oil workers and nearby radicalized communities in defeating the right: “With about 80 percent of PDVSA’s [the state oil company] professional personnel supporting the work stoppage, lower-level employees assumed control of the workplace. Without the use of computers, which depended on secret passwords, workers filled and emptied storage facilities manually. Members of the surrounding communities also contributed to the effort to break the strike by guaranteeing the security of oil installations.” (180)

At the same time, Ellner’s theoretical treatment of transformative or revolutionary change is disappointingly thin. The “grassroots” perspective is essentially represented through a discussion of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s famous book *Empire*, rather than the many more sophisticated theorists of socialism from below, within and outside of Latin America.

The discussion of workers’ control, and why it is seen to be so essential to the socialist project by many radicals in Venezuela, is left underdeveloped. Ellner at one point is much too lenient on Chávez on this question, comparing Venezuela’s commitment to workers’ control favourably to Kirchner’s government in Argentina (188). But Kirchner has never claimed to be a socialist!

Ellner's conceptualization of the state is also unclear, and there is virtually no engagement with the expansive Marxist literature on the topic. Implicitly, he seems to accept, at least in part, that the occupation of the old state apparatus by a progressive government is sufficient for transformative change, so long as this is accompanied by some amount of grassroots pressure from below. That Chávez conquered "power," in other words, when he won the elections in 1998, seems to be Ellner's view.

More compelling is the view offered some time ago by Rosa Luxemburg, and summarized here by David McNally: "whoever wins an election in capitalist society attains political office, not power. After all, power in modern society is embedded in property — in the ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange — and the authority it confers. This power, represented by money, involves control over others, specifically over the labour and life-activity of those who comprise the working class." [5]

When push comes to shove, Ellner often appears to lean toward a "realistic" perspective of state management, as opposed to "utopian" politics from below. Compare these two passages: "In its pure form the grassroots approach, like classical anarchist thinking, borders on utopianism, as demonstrated by its rejection of well-structured organizations and minimization of the importance of the state." And here: "The ongoing tension between a realistic perspective conducive to the construction of a workable model, on the one hand, and social and humanitarian concerns along with support for cultural transformation, on the other, has characterized the Chavista movement throughout the Chávez presidency." (190)

The choices appear to be between a sort of social-democratic, or left-populist politics from above, complemented by pragmatic social movements, and a utopian, unorganized anarchism from below. The rich theoretical and real-world traditions of revolutionary socialism from below are largely bypassed in this false dichotomy.

A richer engagement with the debates emerging from within the radical movements in the poor barrios of Caracas and within the radical wing of the labor movement would have likely revealed that revolutionary socialism from below is not merely utopian dreaming, but indeed the most realistic perspective developing on the ground in Venezuela toward achieving a meaningful 21st century socialism. Such an exploration of the labor movement still remains to be done, but the work of Sujatha Fernandes and George Cicariello-Maher, among others, has at least begun to unearth such movements in the barrios with great insight.

Despite my reservations regarding Ellner's theoretical positions, and his implicit political stances, I agree to an extent with his effort to achieve a sort of "synthesis" of the "from above" and "from below" currents toward the end of the chapter. "The logical starting point for achieving the proposed synthesis is the democratization of the Chavista party to create mechanisms for the rank and file to participate in decisionmaking in accordance with the grassroots approach, while maintaining a centralized command and enforcing internal discipline." (193)

Claudio Katz, to my mind, has developed a similar argument in clearer theoretical terms:

"Movements and parties constitute two modes of contemporary popular organization. Both are essential to the development of socialist convictions. They reinforce confidence in self-organization, and they develop the norms for the future exercise of people's power. Movements sustain the immediate social struggle, and parties fuel a more fully developed political activity. Both are necessary for facilitating direct action and electoral participation. But this complementarity is frequently questioned by exclusivist advocates of movement or party. Some movement-oriented theorists — who subscribe to autonomist points of view — believe that party organization is obsolete,

useless, and pernicious. But their objections apply only to the actions of certain parties and not to the general operation of these structures. No emancipatory project can evolve exclusively in the social realm, nor can it do without the specific platforms — the links between demands and power strategies — that party groupings provide. These groupings help overcome the limitations of a spontaneous rebellion. The party facilitates the maturation of an anti-capitalist consciousness that does not emerge abruptly from protest actions but requires a certain processing in order to transform the battle for immediate improvements into a struggle for socialist objectives.” [6]

Chávez and Foreign Policy

Hugo Chávez has become a household name throughout Latin America, and to varying degrees throughout other regions of the world. Much of this has to do with Venezuela’s foreign policy initiatives and the very public anti-imperialist statements Chávez frequently makes against U.S. domination of the Global South, and Latin America in particular.

Ellner provides a careful periodization of the gradual radicalization of the Chávez government in its foreign affairs. He shows how in his presidential campaign of the late 1990s, “Chávez’s discretion became evident... when he refrained from criticizing the Clinton administration for its decision to deny his request for a visa.” (196-197) After George W. Bush came to office with an overtly hostile perspective on Chávez, the Venezuelan government initially responded with moderation and attempts to maintain amiable diplomatic relations.

Even after the American support for the April 2002 coup became virtually impossible to deny, “Chávez toned down his aggressive rhetoric toward the Venezuelan opposition at the same time that he refrained from lashing out at the United States for its role in the overthrow of his government.” (199) However, the relentlessness of American imperialism soon made this stance impossible to sustain:

“The Bush administration’s opposition to Chávez went beyond verbal attacks and symbolic actions. Not since the U.S. intervention in Chile under Salvador Allende in the early 1970s and in Nicaragua against the Sandinistas in the 1980s had Washington carried out such an intensive campaign against a democratically elected government.” (200) By 2003, “Chávez began to employ the term imperialism to describe the role of Washington in world affairs, and subsequently accused it of committing genocide in the Mideast and warned of a possible invasion of Venezuela.” (199)

Throughout his presidency Chávez has made movement toward a “multipolar” world, and away from the unipolar present of U.S. domination, a priority of his government. This has included closer economic and political relations with Russia, China, Iran and other powers — reprehensible regimes from a socialist perspective.

The “multipolar” strategy was also articulated quickly by Chávez in his efforts to rehabilitate the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and coordinate a surge in the international price of oil — until recently (with the deep slide in oil prices as a result of the global economic crisis) an essential prerequisite for every domestic and foreign policy initiative that Chávez undertook. As Ellner convincingly argues, “The new Venezuelan government under Chávez played a major role in OPEC’s recuperation after two decades of declining influence in the world oil market.” (206)

In the Americas, Chávez’s multipolar strategy has been guided by his interpretation of “The Liberator” Simon Bolívar’s historic emphasis on uniting Latin America and asserting the right to sovereignty for all Latin American countries against outside imperial pressures — from the U.S. state, international financial institutions like the World Bank and IMF, and other agents of outside

dominance.

In June 2005, Chávez helped to bring PetroCaribe to life, an agreement bringing together cooperative relations among Venezuela, Cuba, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic and 10 other Caribbean countries: "Under the deal Venezuela allows between 30 and 50 percent of the going price of oil to be paid off in twenty-five years (depending on international prices) with a two-year grace period and 1 percent interest rate, and leaves open the possibility that the debt would be paid off in products such as rice, bananas, and sugar." (203)

Also garnering the world's attention in 2005 was the move by the Venezuelan state oil company, PDVSA, to sell discounted heating oil to impoverished neighbourhoods in the Bronx and Boston, among other locales in the United States.

Without a doubt the most significant initiative of Venezuelan foreign policy in the last number of years (together initially with Cuba, and then a number of other additional countries), was the creation of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA). "ALBA was conceived," Ellner suggests, "as a new model for Latin American integration, as well as a mechanism to promote international solidarity in response to the individualism and intense competition associated with globalization." (205)

ALBA has been, at its core, a progressive response to the proposal for a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), promoted by American and Canadian imperialism, along with their different client states in the region at the onset of the current century.

The governments and social movements backing ALBA see "asymmetric relations between developed and underdeveloped nations as a major obstacle to free trade. As a corrective, [they] proposed preferential treatment for underdeveloped nations and nonprivileged sectors of the population. While ALBA opposes the protectionist measures of developed countries and particularly the United States, it defends the right of poor countries to protect their peasant population" against the liberalization of their agricultural sectors." (205)

Ellner's detailed description and periodization of the various developments in Venezuelan foreign policy since the late 1990s is a very useful compendium for expert and lay followers of Venezuelan politics alike. His theoretical framing of this discussion is, however, more problematic. The distinction made between "statist" and "grassroots" approaches to foreign policy in different circles of Chavismo, suffers from the same sort of oversimplification as his discussion of transformative change coming "from above" or "from below."

"On the one hand," Ellner writes, "the Chávez government has scored diplomatic victories that are made possible by its tolerance toward, and friendly relations with, heads of state who adhere to widely diverse ideological positions (the statist approach). On the other hand, Chávez's zealous rhetoric in favor of revolutionary icons have generated widespread fervent support among social movements and leftist activists and the general population throughout Latin America in accordance with the grassroots strategy." (209)

While Ellner's analysis of the OPEC developments is sharp and insightful, his apparent faith in Chávez's often pragmatist foreign relations with a series of right-wing, often authoritarian states, is far too uncritical. Ellner is sometimes quick to point to supposed excesses in the revolutionary or anti-imperialist rhetoric as regards Venezuelan foreign policy in the Latin American context (Chávez's denunciations of Felipe Calderón in Mexico and Alan García in Peru in the lead up to elections in those countries), while he simultaneously refrains from criticizing Chávez's glorification of despicable regimes such as Iran, Russia and China.

He seems to wholly underestimate the negative consequences of Chávez's positions on these questions — in the name of "anti-imperialism" — given the Venezuelan president's stature within large sections of the international left. This was most recently displayed in Chávez's grotesque expression of solidarity for the reactionary Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, declaring his ongoing hold on power as "a very big and important victory" for all people trying to build a better world. [7]

As Babak Kia (pseudonym) recently pointed out, Chávez's recent expressions of solidarity with Ahmadinejad "reflect an approach to the construction of a relation of forces which rests more on the cynical diplomacy of states than on popular mobilisations." [8]

Rich History, Ambiguous Politics

Few scholars of Venezuela writing in the English language have the scope and breadth that Ellner exhibits in his rendering of recent Venezuelan political history. Ellner does an often exemplary job in prying apart the flawed arguments of mainstream social scientists who simply condemn the Bolivarian process unfolding in Venezuela as a rollback to the populist authoritarianism of a dark Latin American past.

Rethinking Venezuelan Politics also shows a greater appreciation for an evaluation of the reality on the ground than many enthusiastic Chavista commentators operating in the international left, who are too often willing merely to take at face value the image and rhetoric of bolivarianismo projected by Chávez and his close collaborators. For these reasons, Latin American solidarity activists, students and scholars will find much in this book rewarding.

At the same time, I found Ellner's political orientation ambiguous, and at times patronizing toward those activists who align themselves more closely to change "from below." His sympathies appear to align more closely to the pragmatics of a progressive government trying to change things "from above" through the occupation and manipulation of the apparatuses of the old capitalist state. This perspective conjures up, to my mind, the moribund path of reformist social democracy or left-populism.

Ironically, Ellner suggests near the beginning of the book that he borrows "from the theoretical formulations of various recent schools of historiography that call on historians to explicitly recognize their own values, ideological orientations, and viewpoints." "The following chapters," he writes, "rest on the proposition that political movements best serve the nation by combining efforts to achieve four critical goals." (14) But sufficient political clarity is not provided.

The first goal posed by Ellner involves "the struggle for social justice," but it is never clear whether he believes meaningful social justice can be achieved without the overthrow of capitalism. The second goal is "the struggle for democracy," but democracy is never adequately defined, nor are the competing conceptions of democracy within the various currents of Chavismo, and their relationship to socialism and capitalism, ever sufficiently explored. The third goal is "the effort to promote national economic development." Here, Ellner is most ambiguous in his position regarding capitalism and capitalist economic growth, falling back, it seems, into a sort of nostalgia for Third World developmentalism.

The fourth objective is "the adoption of economic and political nationalism." But what of socialist internationalism? It is precisely the state-based Third Worldist nationalism of Chávez that has allowed the Venezuelan government to support reactionary capitalist regimes like that of Iran, merely because Ahmadinejad opposes the United States.

P.S.

* From Against the Current (ATC) 144, January-February 2010.

Footnotes

[1] Marcus Taylor, 2009, "The Contradictions and Transformations of Neoliberalism in Latin America: From Structural Adjustment to 'Empowering the Poor,'" in Laura Macdonald and Arne Ruckert (eds.), *Post-Neoliberalism in the Americas* (New York: Palgrave), 23.

[2] As I write this, the Venezuelan scenario of 2002 is being re-enacted to a certain degree in Honduras, as President Manuel Zelaya discusses attempting to return to Honduras after having been forcibly exiled by right-wing coupists. Zelaya's supporters, meanwhile, bravely amass in the streets and around the airport calling for his return and the end of the illegal right-wing government of Roberto Micheletti. On Ellner's thesis regarding the Venezuelan coup of 2002, it should also be noted here that he seems to play up the role of grassroots mobilizations of the urban poor in stifling the coup at a later stage in the book, particularly 179-180.

[3] Michael Lebowitz, 2006, *Build It Now! Socialism for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press), 114-115.

[4] See, for example, the rich discussions of far-Left politics in the Venezuelan magazine, *Marea Socialista*.

[5] David McNally, 2006, *Another World is Possible: Globalization and Anti-Capitalism* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter), 358.

[6] Claudio Katz, 2007, "Socialist Strategies in Latin America," *Monthly Review* Vol 59, No 4 (September), available on ESSF at: [Socialist Strategies in Latin America](#).

[7] "President Chávez Congratulates Ahmadinejad on his Reelection," MRZine, June 13, 2009, available on-line at: <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/chavez130609.html>.

[8] Babak Kia, 2009, "Crisis of the Iranian Regime and Popular Mobilisation," *International Viewpoint* (July-August), available on ESSF at: [Crisis of the Iranian regime and popular mobilisation](#)