

Inside Venezuela's "Proceso" - A review o Sujatha Fernandes' "Who Can Stop the Drums?"

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***Who Can Stop the Drums?. Urban Social Movements in Chávez's Venezuela.* By Sujatha Fernandes. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010, 336 pages, \$24.95 paper.**

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FOR THOSE WHO want a more equitable and democratic world, 21st-century Venezuela has featured some exciting experiments. The late Hugo Chávez (1999-2013) and his successor Nicolás Maduro have presided over major reductions in poverty and inequality and the creation of new participatory decision-making structures. [1]

Yet Venezuela also highlights the myriad tensions, contradictions, and dilemmas of revolutionary transformation. The country continues to face serious problems and the future of the "Bolivarian Revolution" is uncertain.

Sujatha Fernandes' ethnography is one of several recent studies to examine this *proceso* (process) at the grassroots level. The book focuses not on Chávez or other officials but on ordinary activists in the country's barrios, or working-class neighborhoods.

Fernandes uses the term *proceso* to indicate the set of movements working for revolutionary transformation; the *proceso* overlaps with Chavismo but is also much broader and in many respects predates Chávez's election. Many of the activists who identify with the *proceso* are more radical than the government itself, and have helped pull it in a more progressive direction since Chávez first took office. [2]

Everyday Wars of Position

Borrowing terminology from Antonio Gramsci and recent scholars of popular resistance, Fernandes focuses on the "everyday wars of position" being fought "in sites of civil society, culture, and media." (25) She devotes special attention to popular art, radio, and festivals in the Caracas parishes (zones) of San Agustín, La Vega, and 23 de Enero.

These activities play a vital role in constructing collective identities in the barrios, often in opposition to other sectors of society and dominant discourses of national identity. Fernandes describes how organizers have used street murals, drumming and other musical forms, and popular

fiestas to celebrate Venezuela's indigenous, African, and working-class heritage. Community radio stations have also been particularly important sites of popular expression.

Historical memory is central to popular identity. For instance, activists have reinterpreted the life of independence leader and nationalist icon Simón Bolívar. While Bolívar himself was a slave-owning aristocrat who pursued abolition only reluctantly, in popular retellings he often appears as a champion of radical redistribution and racial equality. Independence-era leaders of mixed descent who defied Bolívar, such as José Tomás Boves and Manuel Piar, are also lauded.

These historical recastings have helped to foster and valorize barrio residents' sense of collective identity in the face of racism and disdain from middle- and upper-class Venezuelans, who have long tried to cast themselves as the authentic representatives of "civil society" and the nation.

Popular celebration of non-white and working-class identity is distinctly non-essentialist, however. Unlike in some forms of identity politics, "notions of identity function more as a means of articulating a sense of shared marginality." (158) For many activists, blackness and indigeneity are sociopolitical identities as well as biological ones.

These "everyday wars of position" do not necessarily fit mainstream sociological definitions of "social movements," for they often lack clear demands and targets. They focus primarily on educational and cultural work rather than mass mobilization.

Yet this daily work is nonetheless deeply political. It reclaims public spaces that have been privatized, militarized and threatened with violent crime during the neoliberal era. By educating and empowering barrio residents and reaffirming the common identities of the marginalized, it undermines a status quo built upon mass disenfranchisement and denigration of the poor and dark-skinned.

Moreover, consciousness and collective identity are often prerequisites for collective political action. Fernandes emphasizes how radio stations, in particular, have helped to promote community organizing and political mobilization. Unlike traditional media personnel, barrio media activists are constantly interacting with their communities and see their work as part of a larger project of organizing and empowering themselves and their fellow residents.

Social Movements in a Hybrid State

Although many of these organizing efforts started long before Chávez's presidency, it would be wrong to view them as wholly independent of Chavismo and the state. Fernandes argues that the state-society relationship is "reciprocal": "the creative movements fashioned in the barrios help determine the form and content of official politics," but Chávez has also "given impetus and unity to popular organizing," both through rhetoric and through policy initiatives like funding for community media.

Rather than seeing either the Chavista government or social movements as independent forces, Fernandes emphasizes "the interdependencies between them that both constrain and make possible each other's field of action." (5)

Most of Fernandes' barrio activists strongly support many aspects of government policy and feel genuinely invested in the Chavista goals of greater equity and democracy. They have vehemently defended the Chávez government against threats from the domestic right and the United States, most notably during the April 2002 coup that briefly overthrew Chávez before a massive mobilization

returned him to power (and in recent months during violent right-wing protests aimed at overthrowing the Maduro government). [3]

However, the relationship is not without tensions. Despite their basic support for Chavismo's overall agenda, many activists are critical of certain state policies and also want to maintain local autonomy. Fernandes provides a fascinating look at some of the debates among activists over their proper relationship to the state. Many have been hesitant to accept state funding or link themselves to politicians or political parties. The ongoing negotiation of power between the government and barrio activists is a central theme throughout the book.

This basic dilemma, which arises frequently, reflects what Fernandes calls the "hybrid post-neoliberal" nature of the state. The Chavista regime has abandoned many neoliberal policies, but in many ways also "remains subject to the internal and external constraints of global capital." (115, 23)

It seeks for instance to reduce poverty and inequality but remains dependent on high levels of oil production for export. It has promoted popular cultural expression, but this stance coexists with a "technocratic and instrumental approach to culture" that views barrio residents as passive recipients and seeks to commodify culture in order to promote tourism. (147). In many policy realms "neoliberal rationalities" and "instrumental" logics continue to guide the behavior of state officials, even the Chavista ones.

Several moments of conflict illustrate this dynamic well. For instance, Fernandes describes how a government proposal to greatly increase coal production in the western state of Zulia triggered a series of protests in 2005-06, compelling the government to shelve its plan. Tellingly, the urban component of the mobilization was organized largely by the community media coalition ANMCLA.

Around the same time, radio activists also occupied the offices of the National Telecommunications Commission, CONATEL, after it shut down a community radio station following a conflict between that station and one owned by a Chavista state governor.

Barrio activists often invoke Chavista laws and discourse, as well as their own past activism, when critiquing government policy. During the CONATEL conflict, one radio activist opposed to the agency's action said that "on April 11 [2002], when they brought down the government, we went into the streets, putting our lives at risk" to prevent the right-wing coup from succeeding. She cited the defeat of the coup to emphasize the need for popular protagonism in the revolution, saying that "[w]e can't wait at home for them [state officials] to resolve some problem and then the government is overthrown." (206)

Similar views are voiced throughout the book. In her extended profile of Yajaira, a remarkable Afro-Venezuelan activist, Fernandes notes that Yajaira's support for the government is anything but blind and uncritical: "if she does not agree with the president," she feels that "she can tell him the right way to do things." (106)

Rounding Out the Picture

Negotiating their relationship to the state is of course only one of the challenges faced by barrio activists. Fernandes describes, for instance, the gender hierarchy in many popular organizations, with males dominating the leadership and women deemed less-suited for "political" work as opposed to community-service work. Women (and some men) have long struggled against such internal hierarchies, but they persist.

Barrio groups have also struggled to build broader coalitions that can transcend the urban-rural divide or even the inter-neighborhood divide. Most remain “highly localized and fragmented” and “they do not often communicate with each other.” (237)

Many of these challenges have become more apparent in the last several years, particularly following Chávez’s death. Some observers on the left have argued — and many of Fernandes’ activists would surely agree — that Venezuela is at a crossroads, where the survival of the revolution may require further radicalization in order to undercut the power of the economic elite (which is still formidable) and to expand popular control over production, governance and other realms of life. [4]

The revolution’s best hope would seem to lie in deepening popular power and unleashing the creative energies of ordinary Venezuelans like the ones profiled by Fernandes. At the same time, as Fernandes implies, this struggle must be waged on multiple fronts, not only vis-à-vis the bourgeoisie or conservative forces within the state but also within popular organizations and popular culture.

This book is not a comprehensive account of urban social movements, and doesn’t claim to be. Fernandes explicitly opts to focus on “new forms of popular organization” like community media collectives, neighborhood musical groups, and cultural organizations rather than more “traditional” entities like labor unions, political parties, and state-affiliated organizations. (159)

There seem to be several reasons for this choice: the increasing importance of these “new forms” following the rise of neoliberalism and the decline of the formal-sector workplace, their greater independence from the state, their greater longevity compared to Chavista organizations, and perhaps their greater level of internal democracy.

This rationale makes some sense, but a complete mapping of the country’s urban movements would have to examine other types of organizations as well: unions in both the formal and informal sectors, cooperatives and worker-owned enterprises, groups organizing around housing and public services, women’s and LGBT rights groups, the Urban Land Committees formed under Chávez, and so forth. The country’s 44,000-some “communal councils” would seem to merit particular attention (though the councils have proliferated only since the mid-2000s, after Fernandes did most of her fieldwork for the book). [5]

The fact that some of these organizations are more closely tied to the state does not make them less worthy of study, particularly since they are so numerous. Who makes the decisions in these groups? To what extent do they empower their participants? Do they challenge the government when necessary?

In Fernandes’ discussion of radio collectives we do get some sense that organizations that are more financially reliant on the state can still play an empowering role, but that state ties may also compromise grassroots autonomy.

Fernandes can hardly be faulted for not providing a comprehensive view of a vast and exceedingly complex terrain. *Who Can Stop the Drums?* is an original and valuable contribution, offering us a unique window into Venezuela’s revolutionary proceso.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] <http://www.cepr.net/index.php/blogs/the-americas-blog/venezuelan-economic-and-social-performance-under-hugo-chavez-in-graphs>

[2] <http://zcomm.org/zblogs/venezuela-and-the-global-left-what-we-might-learn-from-our-venezuelan-counterparts/>

[3] <http://venezuelanalysis.com/news/6926> and <http://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/10456>

[4] <http://www.thenation.com/article/178496/lasalida-venezuela-crossroads#>

[5] <https://nacla.org/article/communal-state-communal-councils-communes-and-workplace-democracy>