

Book Reviews

Derham, M. (2010) *Politics in Venezuela: Explaining Hugo Chavez*, Peter Lang AG (Bern), vii + 346 pp. £40.00 pbk.

Politics in Venezuela: Explaining Hugo Chavez by Michael Derham is not just another volume on the Hugo Chávez phenomenon in Venezuela. In fact, only a relatively small proportion of the book deals with the *Chavismo* era. As the author persuasively clarifies, the idea was not to present yet another book on the theme of the Chávez government, because there are abundant works on that issue. The objective is instead to critically revise Venezuelan political history, mainly since the 1950s, with a key focus on the dictatorial rule of Marcos Pérez Jiménez and the post-1958 democratic government. In doing this, the author aims at providing a picture to better comprehend the development that led to the rise of *Chavismo*.

Many readers will find this book controversial, considering the author's idealistic view on the Pérez Jiménez regime. Derham is not alone in his romanticism; sympathetic voices towards past dictatorial governments with more law and order in the streets have existed in Venezuela and elsewhere. Derham claims that the democracy that developed around the two dominating political parties – social democratic Acción

Democrática (AD) and Christian democratic Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente (COPEI) – and that for decades was considered by international (mainly US) scholars as a positive exception in Latin America, in reality was destructive from the viewpoints of nation-building and social inclusion. Derham uses a conceptualisation of an ‘Antagonistic State’ to portray Venezuela between 1958 and 1998 – the Punto Fijo era – emphasising the exclusionary traits of two-party hegemony, or a ‘democracy for the privileged’ (Hillman, 1994). Derham has presented these arguments regarding the dichotomy of democracy-dictatorship in Venezuela before (Derham, 2002) and defended his doctoral thesis in 2000 on the political context of Spanish immigration in the 1950s Venezuela. The author is likewise explicitly sympathetic towards Chávez. For instance, he claims that Chávez is representing the ‘hope for a dignified future’ (p. 291), which may be a truth for many Venezuelans, whereas others might have different views on how democracy should work.

Regarding the methodological approach, Derham has read a numerous academic works on Venezuelan politics, but relies to a high degree on archival work and semi-structured interviews with Spanish immigrants that came to Venezuela in the 1950s and later – after having returned to Spain – witnessed the transformation of the country after several decades of democratic regime. According to the author, these informants would be more reliable, something I disagree with. On the contrary one could expect biased interpretations from such a group. Furthermore, he asserts that much literature on Venezuelan political history is unreliable, which he traces to an explicit pact between Venezuelan politicians and politicised US scholars (pp. 81–83).

Derham applies a systematic albeit normative and tendentious method to strengthen his reasoning of the antagonistic state. His five central arguments are: In the first place that ‘the democratic regime imposed in 1958 was unwanted’. Second, the author holds that the Pérez Jiménez regime was by far of better-quality than the preceding and succeeding ‘democracies’. ‘If left alone [Pérez Jiménez] would have produced a country to be proud of [*sic!*]’. For Derham, the demonization of Pérez Jiménez was a product of anti-military propaganda by the AD party. Third, the ruling political class of the period 1958–1998 deserved to be overthrown because of bad performance. Fourth, the disillusion with the national political leadership was so deep that the *Caracazo* riots of 1989 and the coup attempts of 1992 are easily comprehensible. Finally, he argues that the emergence of Hugo Chávez (or ‘somebody like him’) was predicted (pp. 205–206).

This is definitely a normative work on Venezuelan political history. Derham systematically backs up his thesis on the antagonistic state, the merits of the Pérez Jiménez regime and the shortcomings and even crimes committed by the posterior democratic government. In a concluding remark, Derham contemplates that ‘I believe that Venezuela would have been better off if Pérez Jiménez had never been overthrown and Hugo Chávez had succeeded him directly, thus doing away with the whole Punto Fijo period (p. 284)’. Notwithstanding, already in the introduction, the author admits that the politician Hugo Chávez should be viewed as a product of his own youth in Venezuela between the 1960s and 1980s (p. 2).

Regardless of the consciously biased approach to the theme, which actually is part of the author’s method, this is a most welcome contribution to the scholarly debate on Venezuelan politics, adding a problematisation and relevant historical dimension to better grasp the Chávez phenomenon in its historic and democratic frameworks.

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References

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