

VENEZUELA'S HUGO CHAVEZ: Savior or Threat to Democracy?*

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- EL DILEMA DEL CHAVISMO: UNA INCOGNITA EN EL PODER.* By Alberto Arvelo Ramos. (Caracas: Centauro, 1998. Pp. 224.)
- HABLA EL COMANDANTE.* By Agustín Blanco Muñoz. (Caracas: Fundación Pío Tamayo, 1999. Pp. 643.)
- CHAVEZ: LA REVOLUCION PACIFICA Y DEMOCRATICA.* By Freddy Domínguez. (Caracas: Freddy Domínguez, 1999. Pp. 149.)
- LA HISTORIA SECRETA DE LA REVOLUCION BOLIVARIANA.* By Alberto Garrido. (Mérida: Editorial Venezolana, 2000. Pp. 423.)
- LA VENEZUELA DE CHAVEZ: UNA SEGUNDA OPINION.* By Teodoro Petkoff. (Caracas: Grijalbo, 2000. Pp. 178.)
- LA CONSPIRACION DEL 98: UN PACTO SECRETO PARA LLEVAR A HUGO CHAVEZ AL PODER.* By Roger Santodomingo. (Caracas: Alfadil, 1999. Pp. 135.)
- CHAVEZ: LA ULTIMA REVOLUCION DEL SIGLO.* By Leonardo Vivas. (Caracas: Planeta, 1999. Pp. 244.)
- PLOMO MAS PLOMO ES GUERRA: PROCESO A CHAVEZ.* By Juan Carlos Zapata. (Caracas: Alfadil, 2000. Pp. 184.)

The flaws in Venezuelan democracy seemed innocuous in comparison with the brutality of the repressive authoritarian regimes that emerged in Latin America in the two decades following the Cuban Revolution. After the collapse of the dictatorship of General Marcos Pérez Jiménez, the major political parties in Venezuela, Acción Democrática (AD) and the Christian Democrats (COPEI), signed the Pacto de Punto Fijo in 1958. In this document, they agreed to respect electoral outcomes, avoid partisan strife, and share power and patronage. The pact may have been a flawed means to democracy, but for better or for worse, it became the foundation of stable democratic rule in Venezuela for four decades.

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The status quo ended in December 1998, when Venezuelans elected Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías as their president. Chávez first gained notoriety for leading an abortive coup against the government of President Carlos Andrés Pérez (1989–1993) in 1992. The coup failed, but Chávez emerged as a leader capable of giving voice to public outrage over corruption. During the petroleum boom of the 1970s, popular wisdom had held that “Dios es un venezolano.” But when the boom ended, euphoria turned to rage. Even before Chávez’s coup attempt, a traumatic week of bloody rioting in Caracas in February 1989 had exposed the depth of public discontent. The anger was based on a sense of injustice. Many indignant citizens reasoned that only theft on a massive scale by the governing elites could account for the Venezuelan paradox: so much wealth yet so many poor people. Political elites, the targets of popular frustration, were unable to adapt. After Pérez was impeached on charges of misappropriating public funds, Rafael Caldera, an architect of the Pacto de Punto Fijo and a former president, was elected in 1993. Although he formally ended the bipartisan system by running on a new ticket called *Convergencia Nacional*, his government was hobbled by a banking crisis in 1994 and failed to make good on promised constitutional reforms. Caldera’s fateful decision to pardon Chávez opened the way for the former coup maker to run for the presidency.

In the 1998 campaign, Chávez cast himself as an advocate of real change. He promised to hold a referendum on constitutional reform, to convene a constituent assembly, and to rewrite Venezuela’s Constitution of 1961 to create a more participatory democracy. Chávez transformed the political system in a rapid succession of electoral victories. After winning the December 1998 presidential election with an absolute majority, he promptly called a referendum for April 1999 and won a clear mandate to convene a constituent assembly. Elections in July 1999 gave Chávez 120 of 131 seats. A referendum to approve a revised constitution in December of that year, held during heavy rains that led to devastating mudslides in the state of Vargas, gave the government a 72 percent victory. With the referendum under his belt, Chávez called for “mega-elections” to “relegitimate” his government: every public office in the country would be filled simultaneously in May 2000. The undertaking proved too big, and electoral authorities were forced to postpone the elections until July 2000, when Chávez was reelected to serve until 2006.

Has Chávez saved Venezuela from the decadence of the Pacto de Punto Fijo, or has he undermined the very foundations of Venezuelan democracy? Teodoro Petkoff worries about the alarming concentration of power in the hands of President Chávez. Petkoff helped found the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) and served as a minister in the Caldera government before editing the newspaper *Tal Cual*. His views were developed in an extensive interview with Isben Martínez and Elías Iturrieta, published under the title *La Venezuela de Chávez: Una segunda opinión*. According to Petkoff,

Chávez convened a constituent assembly to settle accounts with Venezuela's traditional political parties, the AD and COPEI, and to eliminate them from all major institutions of power, including the legislature, the judiciary, and regional governments (pp. 23–24). Ironically, Chávez's desire to break with the past by restructuring Venezuela's political system placed him in much the same political tradition as the AD, which seized power in a revolutionary junta in 1945 and proceeded to dissolve the Venezuelan Congress and the Supreme Court, remove the regional governments, and restaff the bureaucracy and the armed forces (pp. 24–25).

In Petkoff's view, it is not at all evident that the Constitution of 1961 was a poor document or an obstacle to the development of Venezuelan democracy (p. 48). Ultimately, however, it came to symbolize the reviled power-sharing pact between the AD and COPEI. The new "Bolivarian constitution" elaborated by Chávez and his supporters was adopted in a deeply polarized context. It failed to win the acceptance of those opposed to the government (p. 49) and therefore is unlikely to outlast Chávez's tenure in power. Elements of the new constitution are deeply contradictory, even authoritarian (p. 51). It features an excellent section on human rights, but other aspects of the constitution strengthen the power of the executive branch in ways that may jeopardize human rights in practice.

Petkoff notes that the Bolivarian constitution establishes a unicameral legislature. This arrangement weakens checks and balances because it eliminates the body capable of defending regional interests against the center, the Senate. In allowing a longer presidential term of six years and immediate reelection, the constitution exacerbates presidentialism. It further weakens the legislature by permitting the president to dissolve it after three censures of the vice president, by eliminating parliamentary oversight of military promotions, and by creating "enabling laws" that allow the president to issue decrees with the force of law on any subject. Under the old constitution, the Congress granted enabling laws only for economic matters.¹

Perhaps the most alarming feature of the new constitution is what it does not contain. The document eliminates the clause in the Constitution of 1961 that defined the role of the armed forces as apolitical and not deliberative. Whereas the earlier constitution established the armed forces' obligation to uphold constitutional and democratic government, the Bolivarian constitution requires only that the armed forces be nonpartisan and obedient. As Petkoff astutely points out, however, if the armed forces are deliberative, they are "potentially disobedient" (p. 56). In effect, the exceptional role of the armed forces in the new constitution creates the possibility for them to exercise a tutelary role over society and the state.

1. For an authoritative discussion of the Constitution of 1999, see Brewer-Carías (2000). Petkoff's views are shared by other constitutional experts, including Aguiar (2000).

Petkoff believes Chávez's style reproduces the more authoritarian features of traditional Venezuelan political leadership. For example, when confronted with allegations of repression of looters during the tragic mudslides in the state of Vargas or corruption among members of his immediate entourage, Chávez's first instincts were denial, followed by attempts to discredit the source as disloyal or "an enemy" rather than to investigate and determine whether punishment was warranted (pp. 26, 59). Worse still, the president frequently uses incendiary and exclusionary language against his opponents (p. 68).

Little effective opposition in Venezuela appears capable of mobilizing civil society to check the power of the Chávez government. Petkoff identifies the military as a likely source of opposition. Some officers were displeased with Chávez's efforts to reincorporate former coup conspirators into the armed forces. Others resented his tendency to wear military garb outside military installations (in violation of military protocol), while still others resented his political use of the armed forces in public works projects. Chávez has benefited nonetheless from the virtual disintegration of the nation's major political parties. They above all bear heavy responsibility for the voters' disenchantment with establishment politicians, and their inability to adapt or change propelled voters toward more radical options. Petkoff's analysis of Chávez as president is reasonable but sharply critical. Although Petkoff has few illusions about the authoritarian nature of the Bolivarian revolutionary project, he is not unduly pessimistic about Venezuela's democratic future. Forty years of stable democratic government created a deeply rooted democratic culture in which the new president must operate.

Several of the other books reviewed here were written by journalists immersed in the minutiae of events, places, and personalities surrounding Chávez's astonishing ascent to power. Such is the case with Roger Santodomingo's *La conspiración del 98: Un pacto secreto para llevar a Hugo Chávez al poder*. A journalist for *El Mundo*, Santodomingo builds on his personal knowledge of the candidates in the 1998 presidential election to argue that Chávez's victory was caused not merely by a spontaneous connection between a charismatic leader and a politically disillusioned mass of voters. Rather, his victory resulted from a deliberate and secret plot managed by financial elites and traditional power brokers. After initially rejecting Chávez's candidacy, they came around to endorsing it and thus contributed to Chávez's ultimate victory. Santodomingo seeks to shed light on a presidential campaign riddled with intrigue and backroom dealings, but his analysis will inspire incredulity in all but the most hardened cynics and conspiracy theorists.

Santodomingo does not deny Chávez's populist appeal but believes it was enhanced by business tycoons with various motives: some wanted to block candidates supported by their rivals; some had grudges against

other politicians who had persecuted them while in office; and some calculated that it was better to reach accommodation with the candidate with the best chance of winning. Perhaps more convincingly, Santodomingo points out that the Venezuelan financial world, accustomed to cronyism and insider privileges, started looking for a new model of leadership after Caldera's election exposed the crisis in the bipartisan system. Chávez and Henrique Salas Römer, head of Project Venezuela, emerged as leading challengers to the hegemony of the AD under Luis Alfaro Ucero and COPEI under Irene Lailin Sáez Conde. Both Chávez and Salas Römer represented potentially attractive alternatives to the fading prospects of Alfaro and Sáez. But Chávez surged ahead when Gustavo Cisneros, leader of one Venezuelan financial group, added his substantial resources, which included a polling firm, the television channel Venevisión, and the newspaper *El Nacional*. The Cisneros group boosted Chávez's fortunes and undermined Salas Römer's candidacy by polarizing the debate as one of change led by Chávez versus the status quo with Alfaro. Chávez was supported by the left-wing MAS, which offered critical organizational expertise.

Part of Santodomingo's argument is purely speculative, and he is clearly biased in favor of Salas Römer, having worked in his campaign (p. 16). Even so, readers will be struck by the irony that Chávez won support from key business leaders despite his aggressive rhetorical attacks on Venezuela's entrepreneurial elite. Decades of rent-seeking, speculation, and questionable financial practices appear to have created a business community incapable of effective representation or collective action to defend its own interests. In seeking to explain the rise of Chávez, Venezuelan political analysts are rightly fascinated with this important piece of the puzzle.

Juan Carlos Zapata's description of the rise of Chávez generally fits with Santodomingo's narrative. Like Santodomingo, Zapata worked at *El Mundo* before joining Petkoff as an editor at *Tal Cual*. His *Plomo más plomo es guerra: Proceso a Chávez* elegantly chronicles the agonizing end of the Pacto de Punto Fijo, with flashbacks to previous historical eras. The highlights include Zapata's account of Chávez's history (pp. 76–78), a description of tendencies within the armed forces (pp. 136–37), and a detailed discussion of the dispute between Chávez and Francisco Arias Cárdenas, his former comrade-in-arms and subsequent competitor for the presidency in 2000 (pp. 158–60). Zapata accepts the view that Chávez benefited from intrigue within the financial elite and divisions in the political establishment and provides further documentation of Chávez's dealings with powerful economic groups and their media outlets. Zapata does not argue that a conspiracy distorted the 1998 elections, but he believes that Santodomingo's hypothesis is plausible.

Like Petkoff, Zapata expresses concern about the concentration of executive power, which he attributes to the influence of Norberto Ceresole,

a neofascist linked to disgruntled extremists in the Argentine military known as the *carapintadas* (pp. 78–86). Although relations between Ceresole and Chávez later soured, Zapata believes that Chávez followed Ceresole's advocacy of concentrating power and constructing a maximum leader able to subordinate the other branches of government. Zapata points out the use of military metaphors in Chávez's discourse, his tendency to dichotomize the world into friends and enemies, and his efforts to base his power on a civil-military alliance. Chávez's efforts to monopolize executive power are not new in Venezuela, however. The Pacto de Punto Fijo gave enormous power over the judicial and legislative spheres to the AD and COPEI. The novelty of Chávez's strategy lies in the politicization of the armed forces.

Leonardo Vivas's *Chávez: La última revolución del siglo* may be the most thoughtful and balanced of this set of books. Its scope extends beyond the electoral process or the style of leadership of the new president. A perceptive Venezuelan academic and commentator, Vivas analyzes the forces that led Chávez to power and evaluates the ways in which the new government might be considered revolutionary. He begins by assessing the decadence of Venezuelan political institutions. Vivas believes that the last decades of political leadership under Punto Fijo contributed to corruption, widened popular discontent with traditional elites and the institutions that kept them in power, and created a void in the political system that was easily filled by a strong leader like Chávez. In this sense, the year 1998 was critical. Amid deepening economic crisis, only Chávez appeared to understand the public desire for drastic change.

Vivas considers but ultimately rejects the idea that the Chávez administration can be compared with European fascist governments of the 1930s and 1940s. Chávez's style of leadership indeed stresses martial virtues, mobilization of mass support, confrontational discourse, national historical symbols and myths, and especially a desire to eliminate judicial, legislative, and administrative checks on executive power. But Chávez's ideology is left-wing and egalitarian. He identifies with the popular sectors, and he respects the sovereignty of other nations.

Vivas helps explain why Chávez's confrontational style has been so successful. The essence of Chávez's message is, "You Venezuelans are not to blame; you and I know who is to blame for what has happened to us; I am going to get rid of these people around us, don't doubt it; and, what's more, I will solve all your problems" (p. 72). This message appeals to Venezuelans who perceive their country as naturally rich but plundered by politicians. Chávez's support remains undiminished by the fact that political confrontation does not lead to immediate material improvements because a necessary precondition for restoring prosperity is to sweep the political class from power. His supporters were delighted when the president declared the constitution "moribund" as he took the oath of office, and many applauded when he used the media to assail his adversaries with aggres-

sive verbal attacks. Most of Chávez's adversaries were caught off guard by the effectiveness of his confrontational style and could not mount a strong defense of the Congress, the parties, or the judiciary. When Chávez threatened to use emergency powers unless the Congress expanded the "enabling laws" so that he could rule by decree on any matter, the opposition meekly retreated.

Political change alone will not restore prosperity to Venezuela, and this point may well be the Achilles' heel of Chávez's conception of revolution. Vivas believes that fundamental cultural changes are also needed to attain economical prosperity, a major obstacle being precisely the popular belief that Venezuela is a rich country because of its vast petroleum reserves. This belief accounts for the tendency to reject every pre-Chávez political institution or actor as a source of political and economic malaise. Sustained prosperity is not inherent in oil rents; oil revenues tend to create rent-seeking states, as Terry Karl (1997) has demonstrated. Unless the Chávez government can tap into new sources of initiative and innovation, he and his allies may well come to be seen as yet another clique of corrupt politicians.

Another academic assessing Chávez is Alberto Arvelo Ramos, who teaches at the Universidad de los Andes. As befits a scholarly work, *El dilema del chavismo: Una incógnita en el poder* begins with a puzzle. Of all the candidates campaigning for the presidency, Chávez probably represented the option that was the least democratic, and yet Venezuelans chose him not to reject democracy and pluralism but in the hope of finding "a better democracy." What Venezuelan voters rejected was the party system. Throughout the campaign, Chávez persuasively attacked the AD and COPEI. The parties mistakenly assumed that the more Chávez ranted, the less voters would like him. Both parties seemed unaware that the public was disenchanted with the established party system. They persisted in believing that their party machinery would prevail on election day, and they hoped that the congressional race (held before the presidential vote) would breathe life into their faltering presidential campaigns.

Arvelo Ramos insists in *El dilema del chavismo* that the Venezuelan electorate did not intend to reject democracy per se. Chávez was elected because democracy had survived the decrepitude of the institutions that had given birth to it. Disillusioned and pessimistic, Venezuelans nevertheless remained committed to democratic principles, and they elected a president who reflected their radicalized views. Chávez and his supporters, however, have failed to define what they mean by democracy. At times during the 1998 campaign, Chávez acted more like a victorious *golpista* than a democratic politician. As his fortunes improved, he began to demand a transition of government immediately after the election (rather than waiting for the swearing-in ceremony), and he became increasingly nasty to the business groups that were beginning to stampede in his direction. Arvelo Ramos attributes this behavior to differences within the bases of support for Chávez.

Prior to the 1998 election, four groups were supporting Chávez, the largest being those who wanted change within a democratic framework. They perceived elections as the legitimate means to power, accepted the idea of the separation of powers, and were drawn to Chávez not because of his Bonapartist or authoritarian tendencies but because he represented real change. The second group consisted of military hard-liners who had joined Chávez in his coup attempt in 1992. No democrats, they wanted to maximize power in the shortest time possible. Their inchoate ideology was populist and authoritarian: they believed it was the mission of the armed forces to rebuild the republic, they were skeptical of civilians, and they preferred outright military rule. A third group was composed of undemocratic Leninists who preferred a single unified political party to lead the movement. They sought not to maximize immediate power but viewed the struggle for power as a gradual process of subordinating other organizations to vertical and central control. This group preferred to use the Constituent Assembly as its path to hegemony. Like the military hard-liners, the Leninists had no patience with checks and balances. The final group, represented by MAS, consisted of supporters of change who had nevertheless managed to retain alliances with those in power.

Chávez's lack of clarity about democracy reflected the diverse factions supporting his candidacy. The campaign slogan "Con Chávez manda el pueblo" (With Chávez, the people rule) was deliciously ambiguous, invoking either direct democracy or the subordination of popular sovereignty to executive power. Arvelo Ramos may indulge in hyperbole in comparing Chávez's policies during his first year to Robespierre's reign of terror in France. But the author provides disturbing evidence that Chávez's vision of politics is not based on inclusive citizenship by citing the decrees that would have been issued had his coup attempt in 1992 succeeded. Arvelo Ramos reminds readers that Chávez never repudiated the goals of his 1992 coup attempt. His de facto government would have excluded two groups from holding public office: everyone associated with the Pacto de Punto Fijo and everyone who has been "identified" as having a reputation for lack of integrity (p. 210). Among the pact's supporters, no distinction was drawn between those who held office with integrity and those who did not. Nor was any set of procedures defined to determine who was "identified" with past abuses. Even compared with previous military *pronunciamientos* in Venezuela, Chávez's decrees were strikingly devoid of a sense of judicial norms (p. 64).

Arvelo Ramos also argues in *El dilema del chavismo* that Chávez's vision of the constituent assembly was inimical to democracy. Construction of a democratic constitution requires a flourishing debate on a rich variety of proposals under reasonably orderly conditions that allow for meaningful discussion and participation by citizens. This approach fosters the creation of a document that evolves over time. The process instigated by Chávez

was based on a mendacious and intolerant culture nurtured by a poisonous mix of Leninist internal party practices and the suffocating and intellectually stultifying ambiance of secret military conspiracies.

Readers interested in conspiracies, intrigue, and infiltration in the Venezuelan armed forces will be fascinated by the documents, photos, manifestos, and interviews amassed in political analyst Alberto Garrido's *La historia secreta de la revolución bolivariana*. This book constitutes a significant source of primary and background information needed to understand Chávez's revolutionary project. In his brief introduction, Garrido argues that the military unrest that erupted in 1992 originated in the 1960s. At the end of that decade, the Venezuelan guerrilla movement had been defeated. One guerrilla group, the Partido de la Revolución Venezolana (PRV), led by Douglas Bravo, refused to accept defeat and began to infiltrate the Venezuelan armed forces in hopes of creating the conditions for a civic-military insurrection. Prominent members of the PRV developed "Bolivarianismo," an eclectic mix of nationalist, anti-oligarchic, and populist ideas drawn from Simón Bolívar, Simón Rodríguez, and Ezequiel Zamora and designed to appeal to nationalist and progressive elements in the armed forces.²

One of the military cabals that emerged from this milieu was Hugo Chávez's Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario-200 (MBR-200). Chávez appropriated the Bolivarian discourse first as the ideological underpinnings for the 1992 coup attempt and later as the platform for his campaign for president. According to Garrido, Chávez's "pacific and democratic revolution" culminates four decades of ideological ferment within the armed forces instigated by the Venezuelan Left and adapted to electoral politics by an extraordinary political entrepreneur.

Freddy Domínguez's *Chávez: La revolución pacífica y democrática* takes a different tone. Domínguez was affiliated with the Universidad Pedagógica Experimental Libertadora and later assumed a position in the education ministry under the Chávez government. The book presents Chávez's ascent to power with a strong sense of drama and none of the misgivings that plague other analysts. For Domínguez, the new president is a providential figure who saved Venezuela from the nefarious Pacto de Punto Fijo and its corrupt leaders. Attributes of Chávez's leadership style that disturb Petkoff, Vivas, Arvelo Ramos, and others—his goal of "liquidating the old regime" (p. 128), his "charisma, deeply penetrating the feelings of the people, who do not doubt the convictions of the leader" (p. 131), and his vague ideas about creating a "real" or "participatory" democracy (p. 86)—are qualities that Domínguez believes augur well for profound change in Venezuela.³

2. Simón Rodríguez was a republican thinker, writer, and educational reformer who tutored Bolívar. Ezequiel Zamora was a military officer and advocate of egalitarian reform who fought in the Venezuelan Federal Wars (1859–1863).

3. A similarly breathless account of Chávez's leadership focusing on his 1992 coup attempt can be found in Zago (1998).

According to Domínguez, the party bureaucrats or “dinosaurs” who call Chávez “anti-democratic” fail to understand that the president is a revolutionary for whom democracy means inviting participation, removing the Punto Fijo politicians so that the economic crisis can be overcome, and providing social services like education (pp. 83–85). Why be concerned about the concentration of executive power when the president, surrounded by allies and counselors who have been chosen for their exemplary moral and political qualities, is independent of any particular political interests and therefore free to pursue only the interests of the Venezuelan nation (p. 87)? For Domínguez, Chávez represents a providential leader.

A review of the literature on Chávez’s leadership would be incomplete without referring to a book that lets the commander speak for himself. Agustín Blanco Muñoz’s massive oral history *Habla el Comandante* presents twelve conversations between this historian and Chávez, recorded from 1995 to 1998. It is an essential source for grasping Chávez’s understanding of his mission and its limitations. A striking feature of Chávez’s discourse is the nearly total absence of any conception of democratic citizenship and his persistent use of militaristic metaphors and symbols. One of the most intriguing exchanges in the tome centers on Bolívar’s idea of citizenship (pp. 89–97). Blanco Muñoz sets up the question beautifully by showing how the “Proclamación de los Derechos del Pueblo” issued by the Venezuelan Congress in 1811 stated that popular sovereignty resides in citizens with the right to vote, a category that excluded everyone but free men with property (those without property were defined as a separate class of nonvoting citizens). Bolívar justified this discrimination by observing that everyone is born with equal rights but not equal ability. Chávez answers the question by attacking “liberal-bourgeois democracy” as “a Western capitalist paradigm” (p. 95) and proceeds to defend Bolívar by saying that perhaps he believed laws should seek to overcome natural inequalities. Chávez thereby misses the point that early liberal thought in Latin America failed to assert equal civil rights as the foundation of democratic citizenship.

Chávez cannot perceive this point because his own conception of politics, based on a one-dimensional reading of Bolívar, rests not on equal citizenship but on metaphors of war. Elections are wars (p. 461) or battles (p. 543), and “politics is the continuation of war by other means” (p. 536). In an early interview, Chávez argues that change cannot come about through elections: “a special regime cannot be the product of elections with accords among the powers. Nothing that seeks to overcome this model of liberal democracy, which for us has died, can come from elections” (p. 168). Yet as time passes and the interviews progress, Chávez is drawn ineluctably from coup mongering to electioneering, a shift he explains with another military metaphor—the need to attack the enemy on his own battlefield, the terrain of legal institutions. Chávez remains at pains to emphasize the ongoing importance of the military in his movement, and he continues to

dismiss parliamentary institutions as “worthless except to plunder” (p. 362). Chávez proposes as an alternative a constituent assembly without political parties that would have all sovereign power, including the power to dissolve the Congress and the Supreme Court, and might even require the president to submit to “relegitimation.”

Repeatedly, but not emphatically, Chávez denies that his own leadership is crucial to the success of the Bolivarian movement, insisting that popular resistance will continue with or without him. He further denies being motivated by a hunger for political power. Indeed, his greatest fear is to become an elected functionary in the existing system (pp. 174, 436). Chávez expresses his conviction of a widespread revolutionary spirit among various social sectors, civil and military, but he also stresses the importance of strong leadership to guide the revolutionary process.

The merit of all eight books reviewed here is that they provide a sense of how Venezuelans have perceived the dramatic transformation occurring in their country. It is clear that the much maligned Pacto de Punto Fijo has broken down and that Venezuelan politics have entered a new and uncertain period. The ability of Chávez to exploit hostility toward the political elites associated with Venezuela’s “pacted democracy” suggests that pacts may purchase democratic stability at the expense of responsiveness and accountability (Karl 1997, 92–104). Unfortunately, democracy is not necessarily strengthened when pacts collapse. Most of these books sound an alarm about the ways in which Chávez has concentrated political power in the executive branch of government, encouraged a more active political role for the armed forces, weakened the rule of law, and undermined the existing mechanisms of political representation.

Perhaps the greatest limitation shared by all the authors is the lack of an appropriate comparative perspective. Latin America offers many similar examples of presidents who have concentrated executive power, reformed constitutions by sometimes dubious means, attacked political parties and established politicians, and undermined the rule of law. Instances in Argentina, Peru, Mexico, Colombia, and Guatemala are obviously relevant. Surely, more could be learned about the likely evolution of the Chávez government by comparing it with the trajectories of Juan Perón in Argentina or Alberto Fujimori in Peru rather than with fascism in Italy or the French Revolution. Notwithstanding this limitation, future comparative research should not neglect the rich information and analysis found in these fascinating books.

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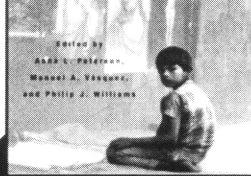
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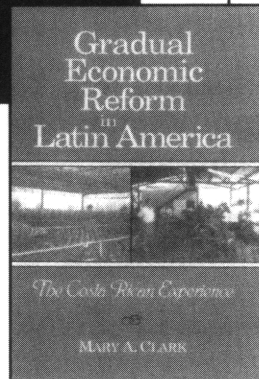
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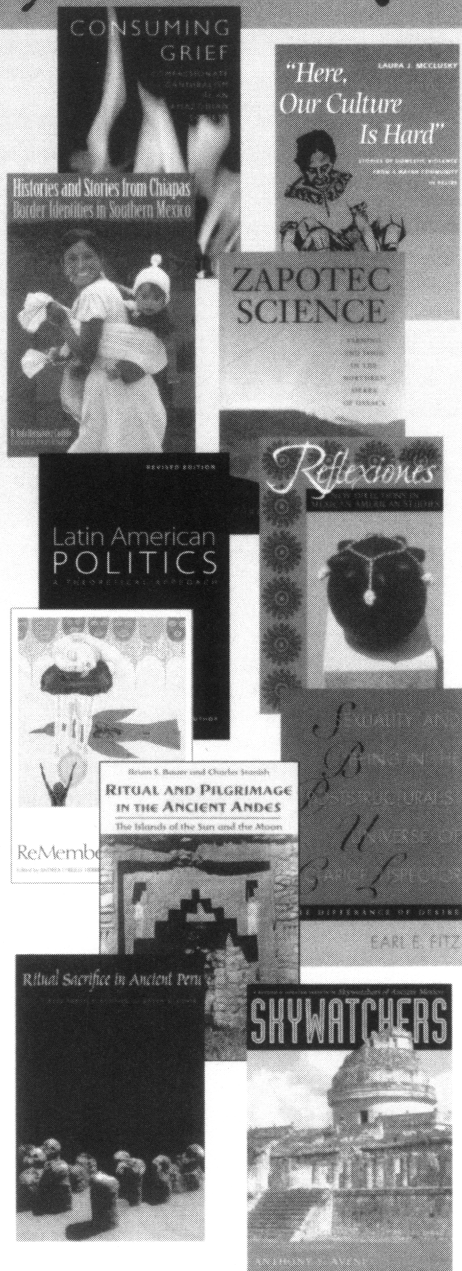
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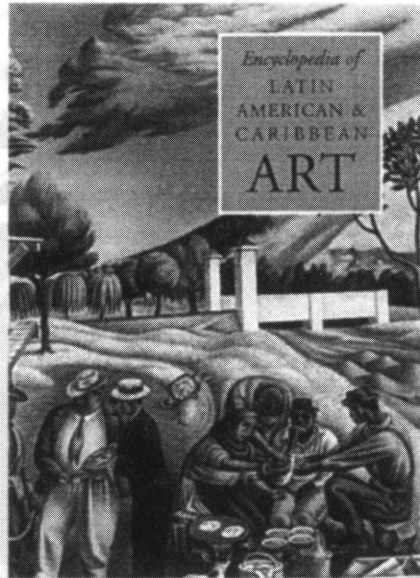
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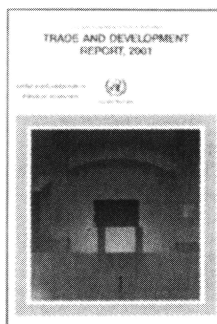
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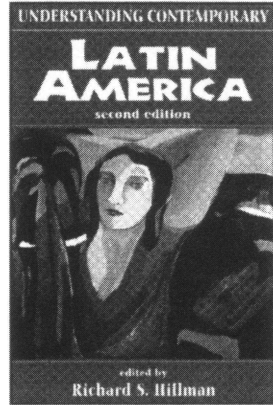


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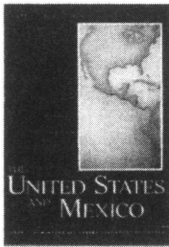
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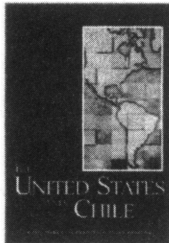
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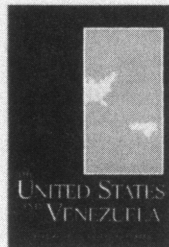
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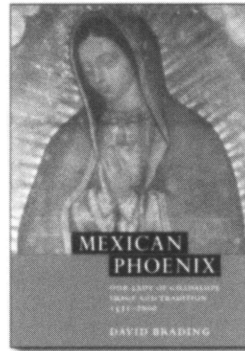
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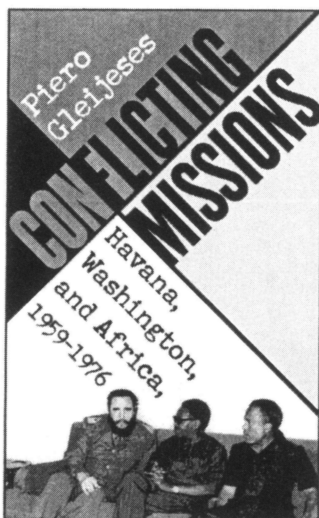


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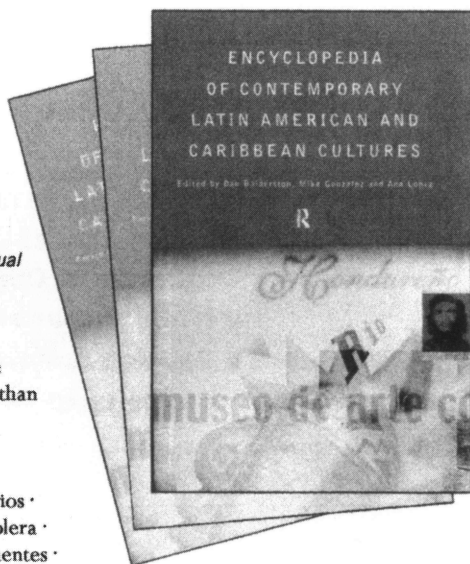
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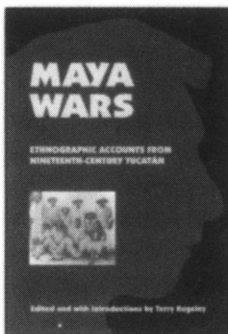
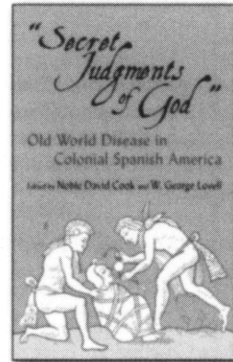
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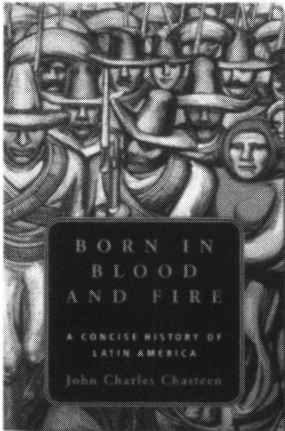
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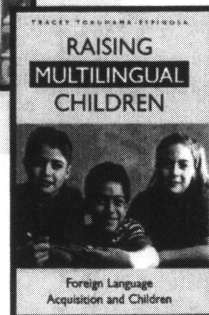
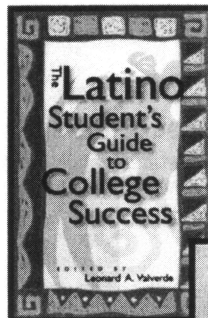
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