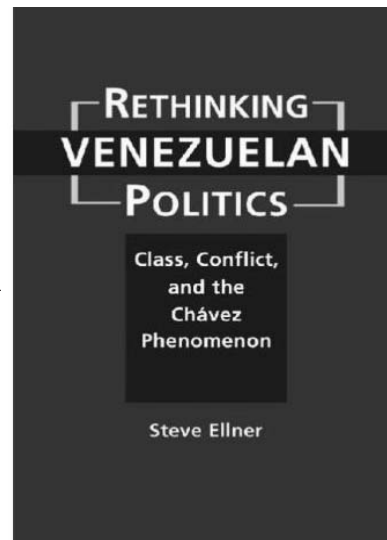

Steve Ellner
**Rethinking Venezuelan Politics:
 Class, Conflict, and the Chavez
 Phenomenon.** Lynne Rienner
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Since the arrival of Hugo Chavez on the Venezuelan scene—and later, for the left and the right, on the world scene— he’s been the source of considerable interest. Is he a new caudillo in the Latin American style, perhaps a reincarnation of Argentina’s Juan Domingo Peron, or is he just an ego-maniac, who seeks to install a dictatorship on Venezuela?

Steve Ellner’s recent book shows that Chavez and the movement he heads is much more important than either of these two questions suggest. Unlike the large majority of the writing on Venezuela in the Chavez era, which focus on Chavez’ “style” or personality, Ellner focuses on substantive issues, especially around class and race. Ellner’s approach rests “on the proposition that political movements best serve a developing nation by combining efforts to achieve four critical goals, as opposed to one or two of them to the exclusion of others.” He then identifies these goals: “(1) the struggle for social justice; (2) the struggle for democracy; (3) the effort to promote



national economic development; and (4) the adoption of economic and political nationalism.”

Ellner’s goal is to really grasp the essence of Chavez and his movement, and he places it firmly in the country’s history since the arrival of the Spanish. He rejects the claim of “exceptionalism” traditionally applied to Venezuela by scholars. He argues the country’s history is much more complex than has been recognized, and he reviews it with an eye to uncovering developments that emerge subsequently while having been ignored in the past. He’s not doing this just as an academic exercise, but to help understand how the country got to the place where the population would elect Hugo Chavez to the presidency in 1998.

Where things get very fascinating for the general activist/scholar is the period between 1989 and 1999. Venezuela, which had long been seen as an “exceptional case” in Latin America, went from being prosperous and calm (at least by traditional accounts) to the site of leading opposition to neo-liberal economic policies that were being spread around the globe by the US Government and its’ subordinate agencies, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. What happened? Ellner argues successfully that the country was never as placid as described, but when the price of oil declined in the 1980s, it prevented the elite-led government from papering over problems as in the past.

The social explosion known as the Caracazo—a week of rioting and rebellion in early 1989—called into question the very legitimacy of the Venezuelan government. It also encouraged forces within the military—and most importantly, those led by Lt. Col. Hugo Chavez—to reject its role of societal “enforcer” against the poor.

Yet Ellner doesn’t just focus on Chavez, the personality and ultimately political leader. He deftly examines various reforms initiated by various governments to address limitations in the social order, and sees that some of them further weakened the institutional power of the state. Combined with a general rejection of neo-liberalism by the populace, a weakened state, and a charismatic candidate such as Chavez—who ex-

plicitly rejected neo-liberalism in his efforts—Venezuelan voters shifted to his side, enabling him to assume the presidency in early 1999.

Yet Chavez does not operate alone—nor could he. He is the head of a movement that has a number of political parties and tendencies, and Chavez both initiates major projects and “oversees” discussion about policies by his followers. The Chavistas operate in a specific place and time, and among some ruthless sharks, including George W. Bush and the AFL-CIO, as well as extensive opposition from major sections of the Venezuelan elite; most importantly, the privately-owned mass media. This means the Chavez project in Venezuela has not moved in a linear fashion, but has bobbed and weaved through a coup attempt (April 2002), an eight week lockout by oil company management (late 2002-early 2003), and a recall referendum (August 2004) that ultimately left Chavez and his movement strengthened, and with the confidence to shift from initiating moderate to more radical proposals, ultimately seeking to develop “socialism for the 21st Century.”

Ellner seeks to understand what happened, and why. He identifies four different stages of the Chavez presidency, and explains the two major ideological tendencies within Chavismo. He specifically examines internal Chavista debates around such salient issues as the labor movement, the oil industry, Chavez’ political organization, the MVR (Fifth Republic Movement), and

the issue of parallel social structures initiated by the state, and explaining how the two major ideological tendencies approached each one.

Yet Ellner argues that it is not enough just to examine the internal currents within the Chavistas. He also looks at how Chavismo differs from various Latin American populist movements of the past, and its relationship with its rank and file. His account differs from those who see the movement's rank and file as an uncritical mass, actually seeing it as the critical mass who is responsible for President Chavez' political survival between 2001-04. As I realized during my short visit to the country in June 2006, the massive mobilization in face of the coup was not organized by Chavez' political organization—they simply did not have the capacity—but was based on self-mobilization from below, with community-based activists being key.

Yet there is more to Chavismo than just the movement's rank and file. In fact, Ellner identifies two competing forces within Chavismo: those that focus on grassroots-initiated "horizontal" relations, and those that focus on the political party-initiated state, or "vertical" relations. He recognizes the grassroots, and its importance to Chavez and his project, but Ellner does not ignore the role of the MVR and the "political" struggle within the state and particularly among various nation-states, especially in regard to the United States. In fact, while he suggests that Chavez is more emotionally drawn to the

grassroots, there are times when he prioritizes the "statist" aspect of the struggle. It is this strategic interaction between the grassroots and the statist aspect of the struggle that Ellner sees as being key to understanding the continuing Chavez phenomenon.

This is a very solid and sober reflection on the Chavez phenomenon, but it focuses on its development within the context of Venezuelan history, Latin America, and the global political-economic-cultural networks dominated by the United States and its allies. In fact, Ellner specifically writes about Chavez' rejection of the US-dominated "single polar" world, seeking to replace it with a "multi-polar" world. The fact that he has oil—oil that provides about 15% of the US's daily consumption (alone almost as much as from all the Middle East countries combined before the US invaded Iraq)—gives some "weight" to his position on the issue.

It's hard to critique this book, which is so well thought-out and presented: this is a major work. Ellner certainly focuses on the "class" differentiation within Venezuelan society, and he does an excellent job.

What I would have liked to see is a more-focused look at the issue of "race" in Venezuela: approximately one-fourth of the population is Afro-Venezuelan, and probably all have indigenous blood in their veins. And yet, the ones with power—corporate, governmental and social, at least be-

fore Chavez—have been almost totally white. Certainly, the white elite has historically ignored if not denigrated or destroyed the contributions of those “of color,” but I believe that the elite opposition to Chavez is more than just because he threatens established interests as Ellner claims: there is no question that a significant amount of elite opposition is due to his dark complexion, support for those that are “of color,” and his kinky hair, broad nose, etc., and his pride in his indigenous-Afro heritage. Videos of elite demonstrations against Chavez sure make this obvious to me.

Nonetheless, I believe Steve Ellner’s new book is not only a major contribution to historiography and to political analysis of contemporary Venezuela, but it is watershed in academic work on Venezuela and Latin America overall. He takes a social “phenomenon,” Chavez, and places him in a particular social context, which he understands more completely because he focuses on substantive issues and not just on “style” and “personality.” He doesn’t ignore Chavez’ charisma, but he’s not blinded by it, and he critiques the Chavista program and performance

where he deems it necessary. Ellner really seeks to understand developments in his adopted country.

This, in turn, makes his book even more important. From his substantive analysis, Ellner argues that events taking place in Venezuela, despite the oil, are indicative of issues that affect the entire continent—if not even wider.

This book needs the widest readership possible—it is very rich and accessible—and my hope is that Lynne Rienner Publishers will reissue this in paperback to ensure its further dissemination. I cannot foresee any future work on Venezuela or Latin America that does not at least respond to the issues raised by Steve Ellner. He has set the bar high—and my hope is that future scholars and serious activists will accept the challenge that he has presented, a challenge that will help each of us better understand what is currently taking place in Venezuela.

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