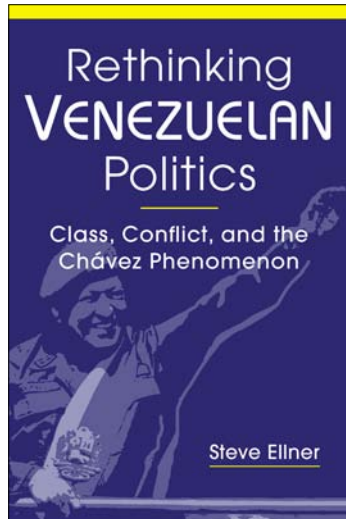


EXCERPTED FROM

Rethinking  
Venezuelan Politics:  
Class, Conflict, and the  
Chávez Phenomenon

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ISBN: 978-1-58826-699-6 pb



LYNNE RIENNER PUBLISHERS

1800 30th Street, Ste. 314

Boulder, CO 80301

USA

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fax 303.444.0824

This excerpt was downloaded from the  
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# Introduction: Rethinking Venezuelan Politics

**EVENTS** during a given historical period shape the tools and frameworks used by people to understand the past and the present. The political setting during each decade or two after the United States Civil War, for instance, influenced the predominant interpretations of the causes of that conflict, which differed in fundamental ways from those of previous years (Pressly 1954). It should not be surprising therefore that the dramatic changes and radical discourse ushered in with the election of Hugo Chávez in 1998 have affected the thinking of Venezuelans of diverse political, social, and educational backgrounds. Not only is there greater interest in the nation's past but also a tendency to reexamine social attitudes and celebrate the defense of national autonomy and independence on political and economic fronts.

In some cases, this new interpretation of the past reinforces political and historical scholarly analyses that were undertaken over a period of several decades prior to Chávez's assumption of power.<sup>1</sup> In addition to this revisionism, Chávez himself has forcefully put forward fairly original interpretations in response to the challenges his movement has faced, as will be discussed in subsequent chapters. I believe that political imperatives have sometimes led Chávez to overstate his case.

My basic objective in this book is to take a close look at struggles over issues of substance in Venezuela, particularly political expressions of class and racial cleavages. Much historical and political writing over the years has failed to attach sufficient significance to these sources of conflict during various periods in the nation's history and instead has overemphasized personal ambition and discourse. Many writers have been influenced by the "Venezuelan exceptionalism thesis," which is a

central concern of this book. The exceptionalism thesis argues that 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 labeling Venezuela a model democracy due to its stability, marginalization of the left, and avoidance of militant independent trade unionism.

Exceptionalism writers extolled the leadership of the nation's dominant modern democratic parties. According to their view, the modernizing middle-class elite that rebelled in 1928 against longtime dictator Juan Vicente Gómez (1908–1935) established the bases for a stable democracy by founding the multiclass parties Democratic Action (AD) and Committee of Independent Political Electoral Organization (COPEI), which contained class conflict. By glorifying the “generation of 1928” and democratic leaders who emerged in subsequent years, these writers downplayed the contribution of struggles and transformations from the previous century. Exceptionalism thus reinforced traditional historiography, which presented a monochromatic view of the nineteenth century that wrote off all political movements for change as complete failures with no long-lasting impact. AD held power from 1945 until 1948 when it was overthrown by military dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez, who ruled until 1958. Subsequently, the moderate AD for the most part alternated power with the equally moderate COPEI. During these decades, the exceptionalism focus became the generally accepted explanation of Venezuelan politics. Only in the 1990s was the stability interrupted and the political system thrown into crisis. The massive nationwide disturbances during the week of February 27, 1989, were followed by the abortive military coup headed by Hugo Chávez in 1992, the impeachment of AD's Carlos Andrés Pérez the following year, and several months later (for the first time) the election of a presidential candidate, Rafael Caldera, who did not belong to either AD or COPEI.

The exceptionalism thesis does contain elements of truth. Certainly Venezuelan politics in the twentieth century was not subject to the class-based parties that emerged in Chile, nor did the Venezuelan government apply brutal repression against working-class protests as occurred in Argentina, Bolivia, and elsewhere. There were good reasons why Venezuela appeared to be class-conflict free. Ample resources, for instance, underpinned the practice of clientelism, which discouraged collective struggles. Furthermore, multiclass parties created internal mechanisms to broker class disputes. Finally, class mobility, which was

particularly pronounced within the armed forces, at times eased social tensions. Indeed, the middle- and lower-middle-class backgrounds of most Venezuelan military officers contrasted with the more privileged background of their counterparts throughout the hemisphere.

Nevertheless, the appearance of social harmony during the modern period and the claim that Venezuela was a model democracy misled scholars, who for the most part failed to foresee the political crisis of the 1990s. Most important, many political writers and the media in general failed to look at electoral fraud and state repression committed against political and labor activists who were outside of the political system. In some cases the omission was deliberate in that it was intended to preserve Venezuela's image as a model democracy. The harsh critique presented by Chávez and *Chavista* leaders of Venezuela's "exceptional" post-1958 democracy, while exaggerated in some aspects as will be discussed in Chapter 3, exposes the fallacies of exceptionalism thinking.

Political scientists writing on the post-1958 period have also minimized the importance of tension and struggle within the mainstream AD and COPEI organizations. In both parties, 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. They failed, however, to put forward an all-encompassing strategy to achieve these goals or to rally public support for them. Nevertheless, they raised issues, albeit timidly, that later were to become focal points of the *Chavista* movement. Writing that denies the programmatic and ideological implications of the factional conflicts within AD and COPEI parties coincides with the claims of the spokesmen for the dominant factions of both parties who at the time accused the dissidents of being motivated solely by personal ambition. Many writers (including leftist ones) who accept these arguments attribute the factional struggle to the eagerness of the minority factions to gain control of the abundant oil-derived resources at the disposal of those in the seats of power.

In this book, in keeping with my focus on substantive issues and especially issues of socioeconomic change, I scrutinize governments and their policies that laid the groundwork for radical transformation. Powerful establishment groups have always had a special fear of charismatic leaders with a radical discourse who implement policies that have a potential for setting off far-reaching change. These leaders, albeit inadvertently in some cases, provide the popular sectors of the popula-

tion with a sense of empowerment. I analyze three cases in which governments set the stage for transformation and as a result faced the hardened opposition of establishment forces: the AD government of 1945 to 1948; the first administration of Carlos Andrés Pérez between 1974 and 1979; and the Chávez government after 1998. Concrete economic policies contrary to the immediate interests of powerful economic groups are important for understanding political conflict, but in themselves do not explain the depth of reaction (to argue otherwise would be to fall into the error of economism). The combination of policies with transformational potential and a discourse that empowers people was particularly evident in the case of the Chávez government and explains why (more than in the two other above-mentioned cases) it faced open resistance from the business sector and the US government.<sup>2</sup>

### ► **The Paradigmatic Significance of the Chávez Phenomenon**

The tendency to downplay substantive issues and to concentrate instead on personality, personal ambition, and self-serving behavior has particularly manifested itself in the writing and general discussion on the government of Hugo Chávez. In the process, many political writers have sidetracked the basic issues, particularly those related to social, economic, and national interests. In addition to specific zero-sum game policies that favor one class at the expense of another, Chávez's government has begun to promote a new model, which recognizes the rights of the private sector but also its obligations in the context of broader social and national goals. The possibility of a "demonstration effect," in which Venezuela serves as an example for the rest of Latin America and an alternative to the existing capitalist system in those nations, weighs heavily on the actions of Chávez's most influential enemies. Political analysts for the most part, rather than focus on the demonstration effect, concern themselves with Washington's claim that Chávez is using oil money to finance the Latin American left. In doing so, they pass over the real significance of what is occurring in Venezuela. In short, while political analysts and journalists have tended to emphasize the roles of personality and rhetoric in understanding the Chávez government, zero-sum game policies and the contours of the new emerging model should instead be at the center of analysis.

The degree to which the government has prioritized the development of a new viable economic model is open to debate. At the level of

discourse, Chávez insists that social goals are more important than economic ones since the basic thrust of the revolution is “humanistic” and increased production does not necessarily resolve the pressing problem of poverty. Furthermore, the *Chavista* movement has refrained from engaging in a formal debate over ideology and strategy that would define the relationship between small-scale production, which the government has made an all-out effort to stimulate, and large-scale production. Finally, Chávez’s appeal to voluntarism, solidarity, and good intentions on the part of small-scale producers, who receive generous amounts of credit from the state, detracts from the establishment of mechanisms that guard against misuse of public funds and ensure the viability of these new forms of production.

The discourse and actions of the Chávez presidency and movement have influenced the way Venezuelans view themselves and in the process have encouraged a reexamination of Venezuelan society, politics, history, and ethnicity. The Chávez phenomenon has also brought into the open controversial topics such as racism that were previously discouraged or ignored. This new political atmosphere is bound to frame the issues of political and intellectual debate as well as academic research for many years to come. The reconsideration of long-held assumptions may also go well beyond Chávez’s supporters. Intense polarization notwithstanding, political actors and observers have reached a virtual consensus that, regardless of the duration of Chávez’s stay in power, his election in 1998 signaled definitive changes and the nation will never be the same.

The Chávez government’s prioritization of lower-class needs, as reflected in rhetoric and budgetary allocations, and the social polarization in Venezuela manifested in voting preferences since 1998, have influenced analysts and actors (including those of the opposition) to pay greater attention to class concerns. This new orientation contrasts with the behavior of political parties across the political spectrum over previous decades. In the 1960s, for instance, Venezuelan leftists strayed from Marxist class analysis and ignored the advice of proleftist trade union leaders who cautioned against taking up guerrilla warfare in sparsely populated rural areas far removed from the working class (Ellner 1993, 41). The largest leftist party in the 1970s and 1980s, the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS), also eschewed class politics and emphasized political reforms and elections at the expense of social demands. Similar to what has happened on the political front, scholarly research has begun to look more at class issues, in contrast to the more institutional approach that characterized it in the past. Thus various, particularly

young, scholars have taken a close look at the urban poor, unlike in previous years when, with the exception of one study (Ray 1969), writers largely ignored the topic (Hansen, Hawkins, and Seawright 2004; Canache 2004; Valencia Ramírez 2007; Fernandes 2007).

President Chávez's interpretations of Venezuelan history, which are shaped by political considerations and imperatives and are designed to stimulate national pride, also clash with traditional views. Most important, Chávez's version of the nation's history puts in relief popular causes and the role of heroic leaders, other than those of the War of Independence, whom historians have always glorified. Along these lines, Chávez frequently extols the Indian martyr Chief Guaicaipuro, who confronted the Spanish at the time of the founding of Caracas in the mid-sixteenth century; Chávez named an Indian assistance program Mission Guaicaipuro and rebaptized the "Day of the Race" (Columbus Day) as the "Day of Indian Resistance."<sup>3</sup> The Venezuelan leader who most benefits from this historical reevaluation is Cipriano Castro, long considered lustful and irresponsible. Chávez often compares his own predicament at the time of the coup and general strike in 2002 and 2003 with that of Castro, who in 1902–1903 resisted the European blockade of Venezuelan ports hailed by his financially powerful adversaries.

Chávez's views of modern democracy also diverge sharply from generally accepted ones. Chávez's condemnation of Venezuela's party-based democracy of 1945–1948 and after 1958 has been more severe and all-encompassing than even the accounts of many Venezuelan leftists. The *Chavistas* label the overthrow of dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez on January 23, 1958, a "popular insurrection" (rather than a simple military coup) and accuse the political party elites of having hijacked the movement in order to gut it of its social and leftist content. This critique helps justify the February 1992 attempted coup staged by Chávez, which laid the groundwork for his rise to power in 1998. Chávez's criticism of the nation's modern democracy will undoubtedly leave an indelible imprint on political historiography and do much to bury the Venezuelan "exceptionalism thesis," which views the nation's democracy as having been stable, unique, and superior to the rest of Latin America.

Issues of ethnicity and racism have also been thrust to the center of national discussion as a result of attitudes assumed by President Chávez and the opposition. On the one hand, Chávez frequently appeals to racial pride; the *Chavista* Constitution of 1999 calls on the state not only to accept Indian languages and culture but to promote their "appreciation and dissemination" (article 121). On the other hand, during the height of political tension between 2001 and 2003, individual members of the



opposition used racist slurs against the *Chavistas*, while racism also manifested itself in graffiti in wealthy zones and even occasionally in the media. At the same time, the opposition accused Chávez of playing the race card (Herrera Salas 2007, 112–113; Velasco 2002, 43–44). This open clash of positions represents a break with the past when the issue of racism was widely spurned and the myth of Venezuela as a racial democracy served to underpin discriminatory practices (Ishibashi 2001). The current polemical setting is conducive to studies that deepen the scholarly research of the last half century on the cultural contributions of blacks and Indians and to the systematic diffusion of these findings. The present period also encourages analysts to go beyond the cultural focus by examining the class and political implications of racism (Velasco 2002, 24; Herrera Salas 2007, 105–106).

### ► Longstanding Notions About Venezuelan Society and Politics

The Chávez era has not only changed the focus of political debate in the present but has also called into question the validity of deeply rooted concepts and notions. Three in particular have profound implications for political analysis and scholarly work. While containing elements of truth, these propositions require reexamination in light of recent developments:

1. *During the modern period beginning in 1936, Venezuelans have exhibited relatively low levels of class conflict and tension and have avoided ongoing internecine political confrontation.* Venezuelans in general and observers in particular often draw a profile of the Venezuelan character to support the claim that twentieth-century Venezuelan history is devoid of the acute social confrontations, deep-seated political animosity, and xenophobic attitudes that have characterized other Latin American countries. Some traditional writers, for instance, claimed that even as far back as the colonial period Venezuela was free of “grave uprisings” of slaves (Uslar Pietri 1959, 4).<sup>4</sup> Other writers have pointed out that throughout its history Venezuela has never fought in a foreign war and that in the modern period guerrilla warfare was not as bloody, repressive governments not as harsh, and street protests not as frequent as elsewhere in the continent (Naím and Piñango 1984, 553).<sup>5</sup>

Many observers attribute the “aversion to conflict” among Venezuelans to their faith that thanks to abundant oil income their mate-

rial expectations will eventually be satisfied (Naím and Piñango 1984, 563). Others assert that the informality of the daily behavior of Venezuelans, the looseness of social distinctions, and racial tolerance explain the allegedly low levels of class conflict over an extended period of time.<sup>6</sup> The renowned Venezuelan intellectual Mariano Picón Salas, for instance, argued that the breakdown of social stratification dates back to the dislocations of the War of Independence when the “struggle for life, food, and living quarters diminished the rigidity of social frontiers” and “the classes drew close to one another,” including slaveholders and slaves. Picón Salas claimed that until then, class distinctions were as sharp as in the other Spanish colonies (Picón Salas 1949, 118, 120). In a similar vein, some political scientists rely on public opinion surveys to demonstrate that during the post-1958 period class cleavages were poor predictors of preferences toward AD and COPEI and support for the democratic system (Baloyra 1977, 57).

A related explanation for alleged social harmony is class mobility, which historically distinguishes Venezuela from other Latin American nations such as Colombia and Chile. The Venezuelan armed forces, more than in other nations in the continent where the institution is a preserve of the upper class, has served as a mechanism to allow lower- and lower-middle-class men to improve their social status. These characteristics give credence to the “exceptionalism thesis,” which views the nation as exempt from the acute conflicts that have occasionally racked other Latin American nations.

2. *Venezuelan political conflict has centered on power for power's sake while issues of substance, particularly socioeconomic ones, have not had long-lasting significance.* Many historians and political scientists have downplayed the importance of concrete issues and demands in political struggles taking place since the War of Independence. Traditional historiography underestimated the impact of the demands formulated by popular sectors between Simón Bolívar's death in 1830 and the modern period in 1936. Some of these historians stressed the wanton destruction and class animosity of the nineteenth century without seriously considering the aspirations of the popular classes (Vallenilla Lanz 1990, 126–127; see also Wright 1990, 38–39).

Historians writing in this vein viewed the decades-long rule of the Liberal Party after its triumph in the Federal War (1859–1863) as representing a continuation of the past and its program of direct elections, alternation in power, equality before the law, and abolition of capital punishment as nothing more than demagoguery (Uslar Pietri 1959, 4). Likewise historians belittled the slogan “New Men, New Ideas, New Methods,” coined by Cipriano Castro upon taking power in 1899, and

considered his government a continuation of past deceit and mismanagement. Finally, traditional historians demonized Castro's successor, Juan Vicente Gómez (1908–1935), and in doing so ignored the institution building spurred by oil money in the 1920s. Even Gómez's traditional enemies, who formulated democratic demands and faced relentless persecution, were dismissed as "caudillo" types. This low regard for political leaders of all types can partly be explained by the antimilitary bent of traditional historiography and the predominance of military actors throughout the nineteenth century—one of the few exceptions being the much-venerated but politically ineffective José María Vargas in the 1830s.

Michael Coppedge, in his influential *Strong Parties and Lame Ducks: Presidential Partyarchy and Factionalism in Venezuela*, adheres to a similar perspective by pointing to the increasing superficiality of the differences among the political actors of proestablishment parties during the modern democratic period. His analysis centers on institutional factors and the role of abundant oil money. According to Coppedge, Venezuela's presidential system and electoral rules discouraged electoral alliances and focused the attention of politicians on the prize of the presidency. This dynamic subordinated programmatic and ideological commitments to pragmatic strategies of gaining power. Coppedge adds that by the 1980s party factionalism and interparty rivalry were completely lacking in substance (Coppedge 1994, 162). Chapters 3 and 4 of this book will attempt to demonstrate that the conflicts between centrist and left-leaning currents in both AD and COPEI revolved around substantive issues and had ideological implications, even though major actors in both camps were inconsistent over a period of time. By the mid-1990s the lack of firmness and vacillation reached a new threshold as leaders of the left-leaning factions of the AD and COPEI parties and the proleftist parties, MAS and the Causa R, were won over to neoliberal positions, thus generating widespread disillusionment. These developments set the stage for the electoral triumph of the outsider Hugo Chávez in 1998.

3. *The conflict-management capability of strong institutions and the moderation of leaders during the second half of the twentieth century explain the absence of internecine confrontations.* Scholarly writing in the latter part of the twentieth century has often privileged the role of political moderates in the achievement and preservation of Latin American democracy.<sup>7</sup> This is particularly true in the case of Venezuela. Daniel Levine, one of the outstanding US political scientists writing on Venezuela, has argued that efficacious political institutions dominated by the moderate parties AD and COPEI channeled political conflict along

peaceful lines and provided the nation with protracted stability. Levine points to AD's and COPEI's mass base and linkages with civil society, organized labor, and university bodies as the key behind successful institutionalization. Levine also highlights "political learning" in which moderates of the post-1958 period learned from the mistakes of the short-lived democracy of 1945 to 1948 by toning down their rhetoric, pursuing interparty alliances with fellow moderates, and avoiding the hegemonic strategies that were threatening to powerful established interests. Levine not only underscores the role of moderates but views the exclusion of the left after 1958 as necessary on grounds that it was a destabilizing force. Although he does not oppose the left's proposed reforms, he argues that they had to be delayed until after the achievement of democratic consolidation and stability in the 1960s (Levine 1978, 107).

Terry Karl in her seminal essay "Petroleum and Political Pacts: The Transition to Democracy in Venezuela" also credits moderate leaders with achieving democratic stability but, unlike Levine, attributes their predominant position to the nation's status as an oil producer. She argues that moderate political leaders basically represented the middle class and avoided the extreme positions of labor and peasant leaders on the left and the landowners on the right. She attributes the political success of the nonleftists to the impact of oil on classes and specifically its tendency to favor the middle-class moderates at the expense of more radical class-based positions. Oil production in Venezuela largely displaced agriculture by attracting the rural population to oil and urban areas, thus weakening the peasantry and the oligarchy. The emerging working class was also politically weak as well as fragmented because the economically strategic oil workers were geographically isolated and limited to about 2 percent of the work force, while the urban-based manufacturing sector was late in developing. In contrast, the "unusually large middle class fostered by petrodollars" played a critical role in maintaining stability with moderation (Karl 1987, 87). Its leaders enjoyed a degree of autonomy that enabled them to reconcile conflicting interests of the politically weak classes. In doing so, the moderates were aided by abundant oil resources that served to win over or neutralize recalcitrant sectors and interest groups (see also Salgado 1987, 100).

### ► Partisan Historiography

Venezuelan historiography and political studies demonstrate the applicability of the adage "History is written by the victors" (Ellner 1995, 91).

The writings of members of the ascendant parties founded after the death of Juan Vicente Gómez in 1935 molded the thinking of the general population and were reflected in much of the scholarship on politics and history. The arguments put forward in the published works of AD's leading figure Rómulo Betancourt, and particularly his *Venezuela: Política y Petróleo* (published in 1956), were assimilated by party sympathizers, political analysts, and the population in general. Likewise, the prolific Juan Bautista Fuenmayor (1969), who headed the Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV) in the 1930s and 1940s, influenced leftists, as did other contemporary Communist intellectuals such as Rodolfo Quintero and Salvador de la Plaza. After 1958, a new generation of politician-historians—such as Gehard Cartay Ramírez, José Rodríguez Iturbe, and Rodolfo José Cárdenas (of COPEI); and Eduardo Morales Gil, Manuel Vicente Magallanes, and Rubén Carpio Castillo (of AD)—defended their respective parties' positions on major events. The polarizing atmosphere of the Cold War added to the partisanship and reductionism of much of this writing.

Simplistic, black-and-white notions of political history were evident from the outset of the modern period in 1936 as a result of the influence of the writing of political actors. Those belonging to AD and the PCV, who wrote about the immediate past, converged in characterizing Gómez as nothing more than a ruthless caudillo. This portrayal was not surprising since the founding leaders of both parties initiated their political careers in the struggle against Gómez's twenty-seven-year rule. The AD and PCV leaders viewed themselves as putting an end to the country's semifeudal and barbarian legacy, and thus denigrated the leading pre-1936 political figures in general, and not just Gómez and his supporters. During their early years, Betancourt and other future AD members even clashed with anti-*Gomecistas* who had originally been associated with the Gómez regime and that of his predecessor, Cipriano Castro. In addition to generational and ideological gaps, Betancourt and his political companions were suspicious of the military background of the old-time anti-*Gomecistas*. This antimilitarism led AD and PCV writers to condemn Venezuelan governments going back to independence, which consisted of one military ruler after another.

AD had a special reason for severely criticizing and questioning the ethical conduct of Gómez and everyone who was associated with him, including his successors Eleazar López Contreras (1936–1941) and Isaías Medina Angarita (1941–1945). The main justification of AD leaders for the coup they spearheaded on October 18, 1945, was that it represented a rupture with *Gomecismo* (which López and Medina

allegedly formed part of). Similarly, writers belonging to AD, the PCV, COPEI, and the Republican Democratic Union (URD)—Venezuela's four major parties that participated in the 1958 overthrow of the military dictatorship—underscored the nefariousness of Marcos Pérez Jiménez and in doing so ignored certain progressive and nationalistic aspects of his decade-long rule.

The argument in favor of the 1945 coup was as much a political imperative for AD as was the justification of the abortive 1992 coup for the *Chavistas*.<sup>8</sup> The defense of the motives of both coups legitimized the subsequent positions and actions of AD and the *Chavistas*. Thus the legitimization of the 1945 coup and concomitantly of AD's rule of 1945–1948 helped refute the rationale for the November 1948 coup and in turn delegitimized the military dictatorship of 1948 to 1958. This line of reasoning also served to justify the overthrow of Pérez Jiménez in 1958 and in turn underpinned the defense of the post-1958 democracy in response to those who attacked it for falling short of the material achievements of previous years.

Similarly, the fervent justification of the 1992 coup by the *Chavistas* had implications for their future political actions. Chávez was an unknown in 1992 and his appeal in subsequent years was contingent on widespread sympathy for the coup's objectives. The *Chavistas* argued that the 1992 coup attempt paved the way for Chávez's assumption of power in 1998. Undoubtedly the coup radicalized the general population and thus contributed to Rafael Caldera's electoral triumph in 1993 on an anti-neoliberal platform, and subsequently influenced the widespread disapproval of his government when it abandoned those positions in 1995. The resultant combination of popular expectations and disillusionment with proestablishment politicians like Pérez and Caldera was an essential ingredient for Chávez's election in 1998.

The basic rationale for the *Chavista* movement's drive for power was that the post-1958 democracy had betrayed national interests, neglected the poor, and was riddled with corruption. The unswerving rejection of the post-1958 governments makes Chávez's arguments in favor of the need for a "revolutionary" break with the past more compelling. Indeed, the *Chavista* term "revolutionary process," referring to the changes after Chávez's assumption of power in 1998, recalls AD's characterization of the 1945 coup as the "Revolution of October."<sup>9</sup> The plausibility of the *Chavista* interpretation of events notwithstanding, it is my belief that—short of extreme circumstances involving recurring atrocities against the population—a military coup against a democratically elected government is unjustifiable.

In short, politically inspired writing on the post-1936 modern period—like the opinions on the nation's past often expressed by Chávez—largely ignored the complexity of historical developments. These writers simplified the critical junctures of 1936, 1945, 1948, and 1958 by judging resultant changes in absolute terms, depending on the position of the writers' respective parties at the time. The *Chavistas* in power after 1998 have questioned the accuracy of the political literature that was highly partial in favor of post-1958 governments. The *Chavista* experience has also encouraged a reexamination of the three above-mentioned notions of Venezuelan politics and society: that Venezuela historically was characterized by low-levels of conflict; that issues of substance largely have been lacking in political struggles; and that solid political institutions have minimized open expressions of conflict. This book proposes a systematic revision of these assumptions regarding Venezuela's past and present. In doing so, it profits from scholarship over the last several decades that has questioned traditional views on specific periods of Venezuelan history.

### ► **Toward Rethinking Venezuelan Politics**

The view of Venezuela's past and present put forward in this book calls for a greater examination of important political and social actors that analysts have often excluded or left on the sidelines. Most important, the book questions the long-held assumption that class mobility in Venezuela has minimized social strains and thus explains the allegedly low levels of class-based politics. The fallacy of the assumption was demonstrated by the War of Independence, when racial and class tensions came to the fore in spite of the considerable mobility produced by interracial unions during the colonial period. Similarly, in spite of the social mobility facilitated by the windfall of oil revenue in the 1970s, Venezuela since the late 1980s has witnessed a high degree of social tension and conflict.

The approach proposed in this book takes issue with three broad historiographic schools and interpretive tendencies. First, traditional historians writing in the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century emphasized the random violence of the War of Independence and its long-term aftermath, while minimizing the importance of political and especially social demands and aspirations that had important repercussions in the period after 1936. Second, politically motivated interpretations from Betancourt to Chávez have simplified and distorted history.

Third, exceptionalism literature and thinking, which portrayed the post-1958 democracy as a model for the rest of Latin America, also presented unbalanced views. The perspectives and viewpoints in all three cases have affected the thinking of writers about Venezuela, as well as Venezuelans in general, to this day.

In analyzing Venezuelan history and politics, I borrow from the theoretical formulations of various recent schools of historiography that call on historians to explicitly recognize their own values, ideological orientations, and viewpoints.<sup>10</sup> The following chapters, and particularly the discussion of pre-1958 history, rest on the proposition that political movements best serve the nation by combining efforts to achieve four critical goals, as opposed to the promotion of one or two of them to the exclusion of the others. The four battle fronts are: (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.

This approach is intended to be a corrective to positivism, which guided late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century rulers and has also been reflected in traditional Venezuelan historiography and even current political thinking (Ellner and Hellinger 2003, 225–226). Positivism during Venezuela's premodern period stressed the promotion of national development and envisioned gradual material progress, while failing to address the other three above-mentioned aspirations. Chapter 2 discusses the shortcomings of the positivist approach as well as traditional historiography. It is argued that the struggles for democracy, nationalist ideals, and social justice must be valued in their own right, rather than dismissing them as futile causes simply because concrete gains were not registered in the short- or medium-term future. It is my belief that these types of struggles invariably remain in a nation's collective consciousness and that their goals are sometimes achieved in unpredictable forms many years after they were apparently defeated.

The banners that have been raised during the modern period since 1936, and specifically after 1998 under Chávez, have to be understood in this larger historical context. Indeed, the evaluation of the phenomenon of *Chavismo* in this book reflects my appreciation of the importance of all four goals and the belief that no one of them should be prioritized at the expense of the others. *Chavismo* represents a reaction to the tendency of the neoliberals (like the positivists before them) to subordinate issues of social justice and national sovereignty to the goal of economic growth, which is assumed will be forthcoming once promarket reforms are implemented. The *Chavistas*, however, have overreacted to the past



emphasis on economic goals and developmentalism by privileging the banners of social justice and nationalism while failing to address systematically the need to create a viable economic model with the aim of promoting efficiency and increasing national production.

Chapter 2 of this book discusses radical and popular banners dating back to the nineteenth century that represented an important antecedent to the modern period. Chapter 3, covering 1958–1988, looks at political currents both within and outside of the establishment parties whose struggles against the nation's dominant leadership and its policies pointed to the fundamental shortcomings of Venezuelan democracy during that period. The chapter also, however, highlights the system's progressive features. In Chapter 4, dealing with the years of neoliberal ascendance in the 1990s, I trace the political elite's abandonment of economic policies favoring state interventionism and argue that this general turn to neoliberalism at leadership levels paved the way for the rise of the *Chavista* movement. Chapter 5 examines the dynamic of the Chávez phenomenon of continuous radicalization and the simultaneous emergence of the outlines of a new model reflected in social and economic fields. The next two chapters demonstrate the complexity of the *Chavista* movement, as shown by both internal ideological conflicts (Chapter 6) and by cleavages separating those who support a party strategy from those who manifest antiparty attitudes and insist on a grassroots approach (Chapter 7). Ideological differences in the realm of foreign policy express themselves along similar lines, as discussed in Chapter 8. Finally, Chapter 9 relates the Venezuelan case to various theoretical formulations regarding national specificity, "people's history," and the role of the state.

## ► Notes

1. Traditional historiography prior to the modern democratic period, which was questioned by professional historians graduating from the first schools of history founded in the Universidad Central (UCV) and the Universidad de los Andes (ULA) in the 1950s, has influenced the thinking of Venezuelans to this day, as will be discussed in Chapter 2 (Ellner 1995, 93).

2. Ernesto Laclau (1977) formulated the thesis that nonrevolutionary populist governments sometimes set the stage for revolutionary transformation. Laclau, however, limited his analysis to discourse while failing to underline the importance of concrete policies that also contribute to creating a prerevolutionary situation (Raby 2006, 242–243).

3. Proposals to bury Guaicaipuro's symbolic remains in the National Pantheon long failed to materialize (Hellinger 1991, 15–16) until a presidential decree in 2001 ordered the burial.

4. The Venezuelan historian Federico Brito Figueroa attempted to refute the traditional notion that denied the occurrence of a significant number of slave revolts in Venezuela (Brito Figueroa 1985, 243–245).

5. Nevertheless, throughout the modern democratic period Venezuela has exhibited high levels of interpersonal and criminal violence (see Márquez 1999).

6. Thus, for example, the tendency to use *tu* instead of *usted* for the word “you” (known as *tuteo*) reflects the informality that characterizes the everyday behavior of Venezuelans. For a fuller description of the personal characteristics discussed in this paragraph, see Fergusson (1939, 320–331) and Leeuw (1935, 159–166).

7. Samuel Huntington (1991), for instance, in his influential book *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, credits moderates and moderate strategies, as opposed to leftist ones, particularly those involving violence, with achieving democracy throughout history, specifically in Latin America in the 1980s. Ruth Collier (1999) presents an alternative view that stresses the role of the labor movement and worker mobilization in the reestablishment of Latin American democracy during the same period. The assertion by political scientist Giovanni Sartori (often applied to Latin America) that a two-party system with minimum ideological differences is conducive to stable and authentic democracy also, in effect, privileges political moderates (Sartori 1976; see also Duverger 1954). A third example of a theoretical approach that celebrates the role of moderates is the four-volume *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*, edited by Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, which credits cautious and prudent leadership of centrists and moderates with the avoidance of democratic breakdown (Linz and Stepan 1978).

8. The justification of the February 4, 1992, coup attempt based on the Pérez government’s corruption and betrayal of national interests is an article of faith among the *Chavistas*. One coup participant who has expressed misgivings is Ronald Blanco La Cruz, an army captain who was wounded in action and in 2000 was elected governor of the state of Táchira on the *Chavista* ticket.

9. The case for the perniciousness of the post-1958 governments was enhanced by Chávez’s refusal to accept the traditional left’s absolute condemnation of dictator Pérez Jiménez, whom he actually invited to his presidential inauguration in 1999 (Caballero 2002, 215).

10. Writers belonging to the “postmodernist” school of history, among others, defend this approach (Jenkins 1997).