

Introduction

In the period between 1999 and 2013, the late president Hugo Chávez spearheaded a broad social and political transformation in Venezuela, frequently referred to as the Bolivarian revolution. This concept took inspiration from the nation's great hero from the Wars of Independence, Simón Bolívar, whose ideas about national sovereignty and social justice also left him with a legacy as a great political thinker. At the heart of the Bolivarian revolution, or Bolivarian process as it is often referred to, was an upsurge of popular mobilization emerging from the country's poor and previously marginalized majority. Through participatory social and political policies and legislation, and drawing on decades of grassroots mobilization, the urban shantytowns in particular were converted into a hotbed of social activism. This mobilization went in tandem with government-led attempts to reform the state institutions into being socially responsive and politically inclusive instruments for concretizing the Bolivarian revolution's ideals of *poder popular* (popular power) and social inclusion.

When Chávez died from cancer in March 2013, the country's poor poured into the streets crying. In the more prosperous neighborhoods however, the home of the country's middle and upper class, celebratory fireworks went up in the air and champagne bottles were popped. Venezuela under Chávez had in no way been a socially harmonious society. His entry into the presidential palace has caused a massive displacement of political, economic and cultural power. During the 40 years prior to Chávez's 1998 electoral victory, the middle and upper classes had enjoyed a near hegemonic position in Venezuelan society, relegating the poor and

colored majority to a life of social marginalization and everyday hardships. With Chávez in the presidential palace, the poor took on a new role in Venezuelan society as the stewards of new social ideologies, cultural politics and political reforms. This turning of tables generated deep political polarization in Venezuelan society, mobilizing divisions along racial- and class-based social cleavages rooted in the country's colonial history.

AT AN IMPASSE

Today, four years after Chávez's death, Venezuela is far from fulfilling the ideals that the Bolivarian process harbored. The country is ravaged by economic hardships, and the political scene is characterized by a political stalemate between the Maduro government and the opposition who won a landslide victory in the elections to the National Assembly in December 2015. This was their first electoral success since Chávez came to power 17 years earlier. President Nicholas Maduro has record-low backing, and many social activists have become disillusioned and abandoned politics altogether. Others are struggling to gain new foothold for the Bolivarian process and to resist the oppositions' bid to regain political, economic, cultural and social power. That is, a new page has been turned in Venezuelan history, and the ambitious ideals of the Bolivarian revolution are seemingly left obsolete.

However, the fact that the Bolivarian revolution apparently has reached an impasse makes it even more compelling to try to understand what actually took place during its most intense period when Chávez was still alive. Indeed, for many years, Venezuela was the epicenter for the so-called leftist turn in Latin America, as well as a source of inspiration of so-called anti-imperialist and anti-globalization activists and movements across the world. The charismatic and always outspoken Chávez drew crowds of people to popular assemblies from Argentina to London, and he was the spider in the web for a growing number of Latin American governments who sought—to various degrees—to reverse the USA's political and economic grip over the continent. Significantly, the Chávez government regained control over the country's semi-privatized oil-industry that for years had benefited foreign oil companies more than the majority of the Venezuelan population. This move, in combination with historically high oil prices, enabled the enactment of myriad of social policies that rapidly reduced the country's poverty rates and inequality index. Venezuela's poor and colored majority population embraced Chávez, who was the first

president in the country's history with an impoverished background and black and indigenous heritage like themselves. In short, Venezuela was frequently referred to as evidence of the anti-globalization movement's slogan "another world is possible," challenging Francis Fukuyama's well-known postulate about liberal democracy and capitalism as "the end of history" (Fukuyama 1992).

COMPLICATING THE PICTURE

However, this is evidently the short and simplified version of Venezuela during the Chávez years and not of much worth if we want to understand in depth the complexities and difficulties characterizing the unfolding of the Bolivarian revolution. Neither is it of much worth if we search for a more nuanced understanding of the Bolivarian revolution's successes as well as difficulties—and how these came about. It is my belief that through exploring these questions we can achieve a fuller comprehension—also on a more theoretical level—of the difficulties inherent in processes aimed at fomenting deep social change and political transformations. This is a lesson that can be valuable for political struggles elsewhere and at other times.

Thus, this book tells a lot more complex tale, taking as a point of departure a broad analysis of social and political change in Venezuela seen from the point of view of the barrios (shantytowns) of Caracas where the majority of Chávez's supporters were found.¹ By exploring political history and social life in the barrios, local arenas for political activism as well as the relationship between barrio communities and the Venezuelan state under Chávez, I will argue that the popular sectors² under Chávez's passed through a significant transformation. In simple terms, they moved from a state of historical marginalization to feeling part of a project of social development and nation-building. However, the processes taking place in Venezuela also brought out in stark relief the challenges in altering social relationships, political dynamics and cultural imageries in accordance with the ideology of radical social transformation that the Chávez government, and many of its supporters, articulated. Through in-depth explorations of people's hopes, aspirations and actions, this book shows how the Bolivarian process was in essence a struggle over attempts to create new moral economies, new cultural values and new forms for social and political life. Indeed, to social activists in the Venezuelan shantytowns, "the Bolivarian revolution" or "Socialism for the twenty-first century,"³ as

it later also was called, were not abstract slogans. Rather, they represented a day-to-day lived experience, filled with joy, frustrations, setbacks and victories, as people were trying to change themselves, their immediate life worlds as well as their society more broadly.

In the midst of this struggle was an attempt to transform the Venezuelan state from below, into a more just, socially responsive and democratic entity. However, the ethnographic explorations offered in this book illustrate the intrinsic difficulties in fomenting changes at the level of the state. It shows how the everyday politics, ingrained practices as well as ideas associated with the “old” Venezuelan state were challenged, negotiated and reproduced in the midst of a process of radical political reform, and how these dynamics brought up deep tensions and contradictions in the midst of the Bolivarian process. Seen together, these analyses will provide a vivid imagery of the interplay between what social scientists favor to call “structure” and “agency”; the historico-cultural legacies and socio-political structures conditioning the Bolivarian process’s possibilities and limitations, as well as the multiple and differently socially situated actors that shaped its everyday and long-term dynamics.

A REVOLUTIONARY STATE

Much has been said and written about the relationship between Chávez and his supporters. Frequently depicted as a charismatic populist⁴ in the mainstream media, the underlying script indicated that people were seduced by his charisma and style. Another frequent subtext is that the poor were “bought” by generous government programs targeted toward underprivileged communities. In this book I aim to show that both of these postulates are superficial at best, failing to respect not only poor people’s political agency, but also the variety of personal motivations for supporting Chávez found among his supporters. If we fail to take into account the long history of popular protests and contestations emerging from the popular sectors as well as the political narratives and collective memories shaping a “Bolivarian” ideology and political agency from below, we do not achieve a proper understanding of the historical origins of, and dynamics within, the Bolivarian revolution.

Throughout this book I will place everyday political action in the barrios in a broader social, political and historical context, and argue that the convergence between political agency and ideology from the grassroots and the political project of the Chávez government opened up a political space which I have chosen to call a *Bolivarian space*. The Bolivarian space

is the complex conundrum of political discourses, practices, policies, historical narratives and ideological templates that shaped the interaction between the state and the popular grassroots in Venezuela under the Chávez government. This was not a top-down process whereby Chávez univocally imposed a political idea from above. Rather, it was a flow of multi-directional processes that were shaped by popular efforts to appropriate the political space opened up by the Chávez government's pro-poor political alignment. While the popular sector grassroots did have both an affective and political rapport with the Chávez government, they were well aware that their struggle went beyond having a sympathetic government in power. The popular grassroots' struggle was both a political and a socio-cultural one, challenging a legacy of centuries of accumulated inequalities and exclusion, as well as a historical state formation that posed severe obstacles not only for popular sector activism, but also for the government's efforts to enact political reform from above. In that process, the popular sectors took a stance that might be termed "strategic ambiguity" in the words of Aymaran scholar Pablo Mamani (Fernandes 2010:28). "Strategic ambiguity" refers to the manner in which social movements are:

identifying themselves as a part of the state in order to highlight the new form of access and inclusion they have opened up, but maintaining a sense of their autonomy to be able to put pressure on the state when necessary. (Fernandes 2010:28)

As I will show, popular political mobilization drew on a long history of struggle, and was fused with new narratives and practices as people became identified with the Bolivarian revolution and entangled into the government's project of social development and nation-building. This relationship constituted in many respects a new model of dignity (Gledhill 2000:27), whereby poverty and marginalization was converted into a source of collective identity formation and political agency instead of being associated with shame and social stigma.

THE LENS OF OIL

Over the past years, a handful of ethnographically oriented books have come out that focuses on popular politics emerging from Venezuela's grassroots movements in the Chávez era (Fernandes 2010; Ciccariello-Maher 2013; Valencia 2015). While this book complements and expands on the insights emerging from these books, my analytical scope does not stop there.

Throughout, I will frame my analysis of the dynamic relationship between barrio communities and the Venezuelan state through a very particular perspective: one that seeks to understand the everyday unfolding of the Bolivarian process through the lens of oil. The epigraph above, recounting my barrio-inspection together with Miriam, Nelson, Juan Carlos and Maria, points to the salience of oil-fuelled capitalism as an entry point into the nation's historical development, self-understanding, as well as state policies in the Chávez era. Venezuela, currently the world's fifth largest oil exporter, has been characterized as a petro-state *par excellence* (Karl 1997). The country found oil in 1914, long before formal democracy was installed, and by the end of the 1920s, it was the largest oil exporter in the world. Rivers of ink have been spent on explaining oil's political and economic effects and consequences (Mommer 1996, 2004; Karl 1997; Pérez Alfonzo 2011 [1976]), yet the nation's history as a petro-state has yet not been explored in relation with an analysis of the social and political processes taking place in Venezuela's barrios and within its state institutions during the Chávez years. This is precisely what this book sets out to do.

THE REVOLUTIONARY PETRO-STATE

One might ask: what has grassroots mobilization and social policy reform to do with oil? The answer is: if one looks closely enough, a lot of things. The first book that I read about Venezuela before I embarked on my first research trip to Venezuela in 2005 was the late Fernando Coronil's seminal work *The Magical State. Nature, Money and Modernity in Venezuela* (1997). Here, the Venezuelan-American historian and anthropologist seeks to bring together not only how oil rents shaped Venezuelan state formations, but also how the conceptualization of the relationship between the state, society and nature shaped social relationships and political dynamics. The title of the book, *The Magical State*, reflects the idea of the Venezuelan state as seen by its citizens, a state capable of doing great things and transforming the nation through appropriating and putting to use oil rents gushing up from beneath. In one of his key passages, Coronil writes:

I argue that the deification of the state took place as a part of the transformation of Venezuela into an oil nation. As an oil nation, Venezuela was seen as having two bodies, a political body made up from its citizens, and a natural body made up from its rich subsoil. By condensing within itself the multiple powers dispersed throughout the nation's two bodies, the state appeared as a single agent endowed with the magical power to remake the nation. (Coronil 1997:4)

In his account, Coronil weaves together an analysis of how Venezuelan citizens “saw” the Venezuelan state, personified by its magician-like politicians, with an analysis of how this imagery and the Venezuelan state’s projection of itself was crafted by Venezuela’s subjugated position within global hierarchies of power.⁵ Coronil invites the reader into a labyrinthine journey through Venezuela’s political economy, political affairs, public scandals and spectacles of power, ultimately showing how the imagery of the grandiose Venezuelan state, both in its material and symbolic form, slowly imploded throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

THE ABSENCE OF THE SUBALTERNS

“The Magical State” is a story told from “the highest centres of political power” (Coronil 1997:15). It is a tale about the spectacles of the Venezuelan elites at different historical conjunctures, and not so much about how this idea of the state was absorbed and interpreted by “the masses.” Coronil himself was aware of this, acknowledging that writing from “the spheres of power” engenders the risk of excluding the subordinated sectors from view, converting them into “shadowy figures in the background” (Coronil 1997:15). This in turn, he argues, “unwittingly tends to reinscribe the arrogant view from above and reproduce its self-proclaimed universality and fundamental disregard for the lives and forms of knowledge of subaltern subjects” (Coronil 1997:16). Although he wanted to weave subaltern perspectives into his account, they are nevertheless absent in his text. To the extent that they are present, it is in the form of a shared relation of subordination together with the rest of the Venezuelan nation as mirrored through hegemonic notions of modernity and development emanating from the Global North. However, the poor’s voices and lives aren’t heard or seen, and it remains opaque how subaltern lives were actually lived in the shadows of the oil-fuelled spectacles at the top.

PETROLEUM AND PEOPLE

Coronil’s account ends in 1997, one year before Chávez gained power. Throughout my years of engagement with Venezuela, his work has lingered in the back of my mind, haunting me with the question: how is the Venezuelan oil state imagined and encountered from the poor’s points of view? This book explores this question through examining people’s memories from and experiences living on the margins of the twentieth-century

Venezuelan oil state that Coronil analyzed. At the same time, it extends this line of thought through inquiring into how the imagery and socio-political architecture of the Venezuelan oil state shaped the Bolivarian processes in the Chávez era. Thus, this book is inspired by Coronil's deep insights into Venezuelan society, while at the same time I locate my analysis in a different ethnographic space, context and temporality.

There is a growing body of literature on the cultural, epistemic and material dimensions of oil, seemingly inspired not only by an acute awareness of how our lives are both materially and viscerally saturated and shaped by oil in the age of capitalist modernity, but also of the looming threat, or even mass-destruction, that oil's omnipresence appears to harbor. The current renewed interest in oil is considered a "third" wave of oil- and energy scholarship within anthropology (Rogers 2015:366). Challenging the political-science-dominated concept of "the resource curse" (Sachs and Warner 1995, 2001; Collier and Hoeffler 1998, 2000, 2005; Rosser 2006), anthropological approaches favor to explore and theorize how oil itself as well as the industries that extract it and put it into circulation "enter social, cultural, political, and economic relationships" (Rogers 2015:370–371).

This book aligns itself with this line of thinking, through adapting a perspective that sees oil wealth as a formative agent of multiple and inter-linked aspects of Venezuelan society (Coronil 1997; Tinker Salas 2009). However, my analytical scope is conditioned by the ethnographic field that I am concerned with. Thus, I am not striving for an analysis of the oil economy per se. Rather, I am focusing on how Venezuelan social, cultural and political formations—such as its political system, state apparatus, class relations, urbanization processes and national identities—were shaped by the country's history as a petro-state, and how these formations were challenged, transformed and fought over during the Chávez era. Moreover, I do not seek to establish a stringent analysis of how exactly oil wealth entered and circulated in the political and social system during the Chávez era, but to better understand the multi-faceted ways in which oil wealth gained salience as a material resource, a social property and a cultural imagery.

My analytical purpose for coining the concept "lens of oil" is therefore to tease out oil wealth's multiple properties as it enters social relations, while also underlining how its social dimensions are intertwined with its structural embeddedness in local and global political economies. Logan and McNeish (2012) argue that we need to do a "qualitative

analysis of the interface between the political dynamics of global capitalism, on the one hand, and local processes of value formation, personhood, histories and relationships to resources, on the other” (Logan and McNeish 2012:30). Taking cue from these insights, this book is guided by a curiosity to explore the effects of oil in a place that was first marginalized from, and then brought into the center of the Venezuelan petro-state, that is, the barrios. Concurrently, I locate this ethnography within a broader analysis of how Venezuela was shaped as an oil state and oil society through the confluences of local and global processes. In doing so, I am also thinking through the continuities as well as transformations characterizing Venezuela’s history with oil in both its structural and imaginative dimension.

KNOWING OIL

To that end, this book will take you through a critical reading of Venezuela’s historical formation as a petro-state, followed by an analysis of how the lives and identities of the poor were shaped in the shadows of the oil-fuelled Venezuelan state in the latter part of the twentieth century. I will show how this particular dimension of Venezuela’s socio-political history was constitutive of how class identities and political imaginaries were formed, and ultimately a catalyst for enabling Chávez’s rise to power and shaping the Bolivarian process’ imaginary horizon. Concurrently, I will turn my attention to how the Venezuelan poor came “to know oil” (Rogers 2015:374) through social policies and participatory politics, making poor people feel that they were finally granted “their drop of oil.”

At a material level, poverty alleviation and increased welfare during the Chávez era was boosted by the government’s decision to spend large chunks of the country’s oil wealth on pro-poor policies. In that sense, the ethnographic analysis provides for an exploration of participative models for redistribution and collective consumption in the context of particular political-economic conjuncture in an oil-rich state. But this mode of government spending also gained a deeper meaning. On the backdrop of people’s historical memories of being negated a share in the nation’s riches, social spending also became a symbolic vector for the reformulation and enactment of ideas of popular power, community, nationhood, citizenship, social justice and political subjectivities.

However, I will also show how oil resources, transformed into money, became a key social signifier for the inherent difficulties in concretizing

the ideals embodied in the Bolivarian revolution. Through focusing on imageries of consumption, individualism, corruption and greed, and the ways in which these were mediated through everyday political practices, I aim to tease out an underlying script of the ills and immoralities associated with Venezuela's history of extractive capitalism. Seen as a whole, this analysis illustrates how both the materiality and the imagery of oil have historically been ingrained into Venezuela's social, cultural and political body, and how this legacy informed, in very concrete ways, the everyday unfolding of grassroots politics and social policy in the Venezuelan barrios.

Ultimately, I argue, it is paramount to understanding this legacy, in its various dimensions, if we want to get a proper grasp of the challenges of concretizing the Bolivarian process' goal of deep political transformation through bottom-up participatory politics. Indeed, the key intervention in this book is that the confluence between Bolivarian ideals and politics on the one hand, and the social practices, cultural ideas and political dynamics inherited from the pre-Bolivarian era on the other hand, created deep tensions and hindrances for the unfolding of the goals of the Bolivarian process. Such a historicized bottom-up perspective on the "thick" processes shaping day-to-day dynamics within and outside formal political arenas are indispensable correctives to simplistic interpretations and characterizations of the Bolivarian process frequently circulating both in the global press and in the academic community.

EVERYDAY STATE-MAKING

Scholars have increasingly turned their attention to how political struggles are grounded in everyday actions—*lo cotidiano*—in people's face-to-face interactions in their local spaces: markets, workplaces, neighborhoods and local social movements, and in their everyday encounters with state bureaucracy and political representatives (Nuijten 2003; Lazar 2008; Fernandes 2010). One of the anthropological novelties in studies of the state has exactly been to treat everyday practices as state-making in practice. Through numerous and seemingly mundane encounters, the state both manifests itself and naturalizes its presence and power, while the population simultaneously comes to learn, feel, comprehend and imagine what the state is. Because it is given for granted and removed from the political realm, everyday bureaucratic proceedings that every citizen must engage in—in one way or the other—are powerful windows into the naturalized and almost inescapable presence and effect of the state—and

thus its power—in people’s lives (see Foucault 1991; Gupta 1995; Blom Hansen and Stepputat 2001).

However, in this book, I will argue that community activists in Caracas to a large degree conceived of everyday encounters with the state as “state making in practice.” Community politics constituted a series of negotiated encounters between popular sectors and state actors where people pushed and tested the resilience of a historically adversary state power, trying to shape a new state form responding to the ethos of *poder popular* (popular power) as articulated within the Bolivarian discourse. Often state bureaucracy was unresponsive and occasionally hostile, effectively opposing the creation of a state at the service of its citizens and subordinate to popular sovereignty. As I will show, *las instituciones* (the institutions) and *la burocracia* (the bureaucracy) constituted multi-layered templates embodying not only a historicized notion of the “degeneration of the state” during the political era prior to Chávez—often referred to as Puntofijismo or the Fourth Republic⁶—but also a complex understanding of the internal incoherence and personalized rules of power permeating state bureaucracy. This emic perception of the state apparatus reflects the historical sociopolitical formation of the Venezuelan state and its various language of stateness (Blom Hansen and Stepputat 2001), providing both an obstacle and an opportunity for the popular sectors to carve out a space for themselves. In order to tease out these dimensions of both state transformation and state stasis, I will focus on the everyday encounters between popular sector activists and public officials, as well as the mundane activities in the barrios and the ways in which these were constituted as ways of assuming popular power. Drawing on Scott (1999), I will explore how the knowledges of the state and the knowledges of the grassroots were negotiated in everyday encounters, constituting a focal site for carving out a space for popular power within the languages of the state (Blom Hansen and Stepputat 2001)—and in extension of transforming the state itself.

However, I will suggest that just as much as local struggles were concretely grounded in claims to material vindication and political recognition, they can also be interpreted as attempts to find a new sense of moral community—a locally grounded form of ethical life (Lambek 2011). In his analysis of the Chávez government, Escobar suggests that:

Besides the policy level, it would be important to investigate the extent to which the processes under way have changed those imaginaries, representations, and desires of the population that became more deeply ingrained

than ever during the neo-liberal decades—e.g. ideologies of individualism, consumerism, the “marketization” of citizenship and so forth. (Escobar 2010:9)

As I will demonstrate, the contradictory tensions that Escobar refers to played out on the arenas for social and political mobilization as an ethos toward re-founding the “collective” through community activism and participatory politics; an ethos that often clashed with social inclinations privileging individual gains and ambitions.

These locally enacted struggles formed part of a broader calling for creating a new Bolivarian society, drawing on a repertoire of contested imageries of the Venezuelan state at different historical conjunctures. People conceptualized both individual and collective action within the realm of the Bolivarian space as part of a deeper process of social transformation. Thus, people “lived” state-making through their everyday actions, which is, I will argue, part of the explanation of why the Bolivarian revolution attained such enormous affective and political appeal among the poor.

CAPTURING REALITIES

The scholarly community is deeply divided over how to characterize Chávez’s time in government. While some argue that he presided over an authoritarian and undemocratic regime, others argue that he democratized Venezuelan society through expanding democratic participation and incorporating new social groups into the political domain. Roughly speaking, these divisions reflect disagreements between those who deploy a formal procedural model for liberal democracy as their yardstick (e.g., see McCoy and Myers 2004; Corrales and Penfold 2011), and those who argue that Chávez inspired a form of radical democracy that has to be assessed *sui generis* (see Ellner 2010; Smilde and Hellinger 2011; Azzelini 2013; Ciccariello-Maher 2016). Though this book is not concerned with judging how the Chávez government fared with regards to either of these models per se, my analytical approach concurs with the latter position. Overall, it will be clear that I do not find it analytically meaningful for the purpose of my ethnographic focus to apply pre-defined and frequently Euro-centric and elitist models and concepts onto complex realities defying simplistic assessments. Rather, I offer an historicized and contextualized analysis of the Bolivarian process through unpacking how political dynamics, state–society relations and social life in the Chávez era was

shaped in the intersection between the country's historical legacy and emerging and evolving social, political and cultural formations.

Moreover, my long-term ethnographic experience in the field allows me to ground my analysis in a view on Venezuelan society "from below." As Lindisfarne notes: "Because anthropology pays attention to the lives of ordinary people, they see society from below. From there, power and privilege stand out in sharp relief" (Lindisfarne 2008:23, cited in Armbruster and Lærke 2008). In alignment with this assertion, this book is concerned with tracing the various ways in which different forms of power—be it epistemological, political, crude or structural—have shaped life in the Venezuelan barrios both in the past and in the present, and the creative and multi-faceted ways of resistance and contestation this has engendered. Concurrently, I seek to carve out a broad and complex understanding of processes of change and political struggle under the Chávez government, as experienced and conceptualized by the urban popular sectors in Caracas.

LIFE IN THE BARRIO

By now, the reader should have a fair idea about the analytical scope and ambition of this book. Hence, it is time to properly introduce the ethnographic field in which these analytical explorations are located in. Allow me to present a snapshot of a random but representative barrio in western Caracas:

* * *

You get off the crowded *camioneta* (small bus), decorated with plastic saints, plastic flowers and painted stencils, filled with school children, mothers holding their babies, housewives carrying grocery bags, white-collar workers dressed in neatly ironed shirts, youngsters listening to music from their telephone, the rest of us forced to listen to whatever salsa, reggaeton or hip-hop tune the driver prefers. The *camioneta* has taken us from the main street, where we lined up waiting for the buses to fill and take off, up through the winding, potholed main road passing through various barrio neighborhoods, interspersed with some lower middle-class residential buildings.

Here in the Venezuelan barrios you find all the people who keep the wheels in Venezuelan society going; the brick-layers, the hairdressers, the

waiters, the electricians, the cooks, the cleaners, the gardeners, the bus drivers, the taxi drivers, the construction workers, the shop attendants, the secretaries, the nannies, the informal vendors; indeed, the entire proletariat as well as precariat. You also find many lower-level government employees, bank clerks, teachers, nurses, police, soldiers, and not in the least, housewives who shoulder much of society's high costs for social and household reproduction.

On both sides of the road there are sprawling barrio houses built on top of each other, packed so closely together that it is almost impossible to distinguish one construction from the other. Some of them are half-built or abandoned—perhaps those who built them ran out of money or found luck somewhere else.⁷ Some of them have home-painted signs hanging on the wall announcing *se vende* (for sale). Others have a poster of Chávez hanging in the window facing the road. Here and there, some provisionally built stairways or passages lead into the barrio, continuing up the hill. It is impossible to see how far up the community goes, as the buildings along the road, often reaching three or four stories, block the view. All you see is an impressive organic mass defying gravity. Most of the houses have grids in front of their open window frames, where laundry is left to dry.

Along the road, on the ground floor, various *bodegas* (small shops) are selling everyday basics—candy, sodas and juice, mobile telephone refill cards, canned tuna, single rolls of toilet paper. The bodegas mostly have a grid between the customer and the vendor, and most shops have a sign outside saying something like *no se fia* (no credit). Often, friends and neighbors hang out outside gossiping with the shop owner.

The roadside is dotted by outdoor garages, where greasy men with bare chests are repairing crumbling cars that have been repaired hundred times before. These men are more likely than others to whistle at girls passing by or to make indecent comments. On weekends, they often have a beer while working, and younger boys hang around getting introduced to the men's world. The sidewalks along the streets are often falling apart, suffering from a lack of maintenance and frequent remakings because pipe systems need to be repaired or extended, or new families try to tap into them. Plastic tables frequently line the sidewalks, offering mobile phones for rent, charging by the minute. These stalls also sell chewing gum, candy and single cigarettes, and sometimes home-baked cakes wrapped in plastic. Or, alternatively, pirated DVDs or lottery tickets.

It is often young girls working at these stalls, text-messaging friends, boyfriends and potential boyfriends, picking at their neatly painted acrylic nails, chatting and gossiping with friends and neighbors. Their hair,

clothes and makeup are immaculate. Venezuela is renowned for its women, though the women who win Miss Universe and Miss World are upper-class women of European descent who have spent years in beauty schools and a fortune on plastic surgery. The girls in the barrios are shorter, darker and with more curves, radiating a street-smart air and awareness of their body—a result of having grown up in a society where little girls are socialized into becoming sexual objects before they have even started primary school.⁸ Many of the barrio girls become pregnant while still in their adolescence. They carry their “adorned” babies on the bus, on the metro, and through barrio streets looking like what they are: a child carrying a child. The father may be the skinny local teenage boy who hangs out at the corner, mobile phone in hand, expensive sporting clothes, watching the girls from a distance, a true “street corner society” with complex social rules and crushing demands for upholding masculine pride. In the evenings, weekends or holidays, the boys might be drinking beer, or collectively repairing an old car or a motorbike.

The neighborhood’s skinny alcoholics, crack addicts and near-crazy people hang out on the corner as well, or perhaps sit on the ground next to an electricity pole. They greet passersby and are as much a part of street life as anyone else, feeding their habits and otherwise surviving by taking small jobs in the neighborhood, like carrying bags of sand for cement, gas tanks, or bricks, or basically any small job that can be found.

Housewives and the elderly also walk along the narrow sidewalk, quickly picking up something from the bodega and stopping for a chat, sometimes dressed in nightgowns or comfortable clothes. There may be children accompanying them or they might have a child in their arms. In general, there are children everywhere, quickly passing by in their black-and-blue school uniform, or hanging out in the street with a parent who has a business close by, or on their own, socialized to the adults’ world all too early. The way they talk, how they move, how they carry their body, their eyes—it all reveals that their innocence is long gone, if it ever was there.

Street dogs, also part of the urban landscape, roam through the garbage, sad-looking mixed breeds, often with a limp, a cut, or half an ear torn off after surviving a dog-eats-dog fight. Pieces of garbage and litter are everywhere—paper, plastic cans, empty soda bottles, empty bags of fries and candy, half-eaten food. Once in a while a community brigade cleans the open sewers, the pavements, the sidewalks, the hillside, which invariably become littered again soon. The smell of garbage mixes with the smell of sewage, urine, gasoline, dust and food, creating a greasy air that covers your skin with a thin, black film.

Along the road is a basketball field, set up by the communal council, where the local boys shout, listen to music and play basketball while looking at girls walking by or gossiping with some of them. Girls often hang around the basketball field in groups, alternating between posing for and quarreling with the boys in teenager's way. These girls will often be talked about by their neighbors. Their reputation can easily be tarnished even before they appear with a growing belly. There is probably a *Barrío Adentro* module along the main street—the characteristic octagonal Cuban medical station, with an office on the first floor and the doctor's apartment on the second. A hand-written note announces its opening hours. A lot of hand-written notes are also pegged to the walls of private homes, selling cakes, yogurt, vegetables, cigarettes, gelatin, or offering nail, hair or makeup services, repair of domestic items or whatever other entrepreneurial activities its residents have come up with to make some extra money.

By eight or nine o'clock at the latest, most barrio streets start becoming more and more deserted. Violence and insecurity have caused most "ordinary people" to stay inside their homes late in the evening and at night, unless they have to come home late from work. This has led to less "ordinary people" mingling in the street, and turning public and common spaces into areas considered even more unsafe. Imagined or not, the streets are considered the unruly and hazardous realm of *el hampa* (the street delinquents) at night. Fenced off by locks and metal grids, people gather in their small *ranchos* (barrio homes) and apartments, eating a late evening dinner or snack, talking, and watching TV. Except for the occasional barking dog, gunshot, noisy muffler or muffled music, the barrios are surprisingly silent at night during weekdays. Its inhabitants have a long and exhausting day of work, studies and household chores waiting for them the next day.

* * *

UNBOUNDED BARRIOS

This snapshot serves as an introduction to the barrios of Caracas, my site of ethnographic research during the past 12 years. Since 2005, I have gone back and forth to Venezuela eight times, spending altogether almost two years in the country. For the most part I have been living in either the parish of 23 de Enero or in the hilltop barrio of Casalta 3 above the com-

mercial- and residential hub known as Propatria. In many ways Venezuela has become my second homeland: in the course of these years, I married a Venezuelan, got an extended family-in-law spread across Caracas and indeed Venezuela, and gave birth to a daughter that is half-Venezuelan.

During the field visits when I lived in 23 de Enero, I rented a small room in an apartment close to the metro station known as Agua Salud. Here, I shared a flat with Ernesto, a journalist and revolutionary native of 23 de Enero in his early 60s, his blind poodle Beethoven, and his cat Amarilla (and later her four, non-toilet-trained kittens). Later, I moved to Casalta 3, where I lived with my extended family-in-law in a large, typical barrio dwelling that had been constructed and gradually expanded over the last 40 years as the family grew.

These different living arrangements provided me with a broad platform for getting to know Venezuela's barrios from the inside. Living with Ernesto was an invaluable inroad into getting to know people in 23 de Enero, and I learned a lot from his stories about the community's



Photo 1.1 The parish of 23 de Enero. Photo by the author

history—and his engagement with it—for the past 60 years. Moving to Casalta 3, however, gave me a contrasting experience to that from 23 de Enero, which is a very emblematic barrio with a set of very particular characteristics. The area surrounding Propatria had a different social and demographic profile and a different social and political history, and gave me new insights into the heterogeneity—yet also similarities—that exists between different barrios. Second, living with an extended family also provided a space for me to get to know Venezuela much more from “the inside,” providing me with detailed knowledge of social life, family dynamics, and the nitty-gritty details of everyday practicalities.

However, throughout all my field visits, I have been regularly visiting and traveling to other barrios in western Caracas. The purpose of this methodology was that I didn’t want to confine myself to one barrio com-



Photo 1.2 Some of the famous *superbloques* (apartment buildings) of 23 de Enero with the barrio la Pastora and the mountain ridge Ávila in the background. Photo by the author

munity. As you settle in a barrio community, you become acquainted with people who want to bring you to their area and to attend events or meetings in other parts of the city. Community activism fomented new and very fluid social networks and meeting arenas both within and among barrios. Thus, drawing an analytical circle around “my community” would have been both limiting and reifying. As Fernandes also notes in her study of social movements in western Caracas: “As I moved among the barrios of Caracas, I realized that these worlds within the shantytowns were an interconnected whole, and selecting one research site would be an artificial enterprise” (Fernandes 2010:30).

Moreover, my quest for understanding the Bolivarian process as a dynamic interaction between shantytown communities and the state in a broader perspective also required that I explored political change and social transformations beyond the socio-territorial confines of the barrios. To that end, I went to all sorts of public and political events and venues. I participated in mass gatherings with Chávez and military parades, sat in on committee meetings of the National Assembly, visited PDVSA headquarters, was in doubt about who is interviewing whom in the intelligence unit of the vice-presidency, lingered in the waiting area of the mayor’s office and in lunch box queues waiting for ministers and other high-level officials. I chatted with state bureaucrats, studied public documents, was accidentally locked up in the national assembly office building after closing hours (a guard eventually came to my rescue) and visited public shelters for the homeless after the 2011 torrential rains. I have also twice roadtripped across Venezuela, visiting 20 of the country’s 23 states and meeting up with community activists in other parts of the country. And finally, on the back of a moped I traveled from Caracas to the remote rural village known as Llorá Llorá (“Cry Cry”) in the state of Guárico (allegedly constituting the center point of the country), making me intimately acquainted with the country’s many potholed roads in a manner that my buttocks will never forget.

But most of all I delved into the barrios of western Caracas, spending liters of sweat climbing the arduous barrio hills, and fared up and down its main roads in *camionetas*. I participated in numerous community assemblies and community groups meetings, “hung around” talking to people, and inspected a variety of community projects accompanied by both local activists and public officials.



Photo 1.3 Public meeting about the communal councils in the National Assembly. Photo by the author

EVERYDAY BARRIO LIFE

Living in a barrio was an indispensable tool for understanding local life worlds and the deeper meaning of political struggle from below. Though naturally shielded by having more money at my disposal than local residents, I physically felt the inherent challenges of living in a barrio. That was not only related to the unstable and interrupted supplies of water, the strenuous task of buying food and household items and the problems with garbage collection and public transport, but I also witnessed the social problems generated by decades of accumulated poverty up close. The threat of crime and violence was a factor that structured my everyday life, and the (often related) hidden and visible consequences of alcohol and drug (ab)use evidenced the deeply rooted social problems that the processes of social struggle were seeking to reverse. Twice, I ducked because shooting broke out nearby, and on several occasions people were killed in the street in places where I used to spend my time or pass by.



Photo 1.4 Mural of Che Guevara, 23 de Enero. Photo by the author

At the same time, living in a barrio was also a powerful antidote to the tendency of scholars, media commentators and middle- and upper-class Venezuelans to portray the barrios as “no-go” areas; as a social anomaly in a constant state of emergency. Life in the barrio has many characteristics that I deeply appreciate. It is filled with energy, informality, friendliness, humor and generosity, and everyday life goes on as it does anywhere else. As I explore in Chap. 3, the barrios are composed by social micro-landscapes, where people’s engagement with their surroundings is structured by social relationships, local histories and spatially embodied



Photo 1.5 Barrio houses, 23 de Enero. Photo by the author

knowledge. As my research field also became my temporary home, I too found “my” place in the social landscape. Joining the local boxing club, drinking beer in the local backyard bar, attending popular religious celebrations, chatting with my working-from-home manicurist, eating at local food joints and participating in women’s gossiping around the kitchen table over a bottle of sweet liquor constituted a central part of my ethnographic engagement with Caracas.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This remaining part of this book is divided into nine chapters, followed by a conclusion. In Chap. 2, I offer a reading of Venezuelan history that frames the analysis and arguments pursued in the rest of the book. In this chapter, I will pay particular attention to Venezuela’s development trajectory as an oil state, and how this shaped key political dynamics in the

Puntofijo era. Chapter 3 seeks to shed light on the history of grassroots organization and popular sector struggle that preceded and paved the way for Chávez's electoral success, followed by an exploration of people's experiences and memories from the Puntofijo era in the form of poverty, marginalization and state violence. Chapter 4 draws linkages between different forms of spatial, economic and social segregation that have shaped Venezuelan society, and shows how these divisions played out in the context of political polarization in the Chávez era. Toward the end of the chapter, I focus on people's own explanations for their support for Chávez and the Bolivarian process. Chapter 5 begins the exploration of community politics through focusing on how popular sector communities established themselves as political actors vis-à-vis the state through the idiom of *poder popular*. At the same time, it sheds light on the heterogeneity of popular sector communities, and how this is played out in local power struggles. These dynamics are teased out through a close examination of a case study depicting the mobilization around the building of a new hospital in 23 de Enero. Chapter 6 brings us on the inside of the Venezuelan state, as I critically discuss how the internal dynamics, institutionalized structures and heterogeneous actors within the Venezuelan state apparatus shaped the unfolding of the Bolivarian process. This discussion prepares the ground for Chap. 7, where I examine the interface between the Venezuelan state and popular sector communities through focusing on the so-called *promotores integrales*—lower-level public employees who assist community organizations that receive funds from the state. In this chapter, I also discuss how different forms of knowledges—that of the state and that of the popular communities—are negotiated in the context of community politics, and how social and political hierarchies between state officials and popular sector activists are challenged and mediated in Bolivarian discourse. In Chap. 8, I will explore how the social dimensions of Venezuela's historical legacy as an extractive state is articulated through discourses and practices within the Bolivarian space. In particular, we will tease out how templates revolving around oil wealth, money and consumption emerge as social critique of capitalism's and neoliberalism's harmful effect upon society. I will also show how these templates gain salience as potent social signifiers in the ideological and political polarization between supporters and opponents of the Bolivarian process, and how these can be linked to global templates associated with modernity and development. In Chap. 9, I turn to the issue of collective consumption in

the form of social spending during the Chávez era. I will examine how the historical political culture of state paternalism and strategic clientelism was both contested and reproduced, and how social spending produced at times ambivalent notions of “deserving” and “undeserving” recipient of oil wealth. In Chap. 10, I will turn to the issue of corruption. I will seek to illuminate corruption’s historical meaning and origin in the light of Venezuela’s historical trajectories as a post-colonial extractive state, and its role as a dense social signifier and as a social practice in the context of community politics. In the final chapter, I offer a synthesized analysis of the different foci and lines of investigation pursued throughout the book, before I reflect upon what the Venezuelan case can tell us about the promises and perils of oil wealth, as well as political, ecological and social challenges characterizing the contemporary state of the world more broadly.

NOTES

1. Note that voting patterns in favor of the Chávez government were not consistently class-based as he also drew significant support from the middle class (see Lupu 2010). However, this book is solely focusing on the relationship between popular sector citizens and the Chávez government.
2. By the term “popular sectors,” I am, in the context of this book, referring to the part of the urban population living in lower-income housing areas, or informal shantytown settlements. It is important to note that this term does not only refer to a socio-economic stratum but also refer to an imagined community (Anderson 1983), “the poor,” depending on context. Similarly, *el pueblo* constitutes a multi-faceted and multi-layered term in Spanish, meaning village/rural town or people/popular classes, or a combination of both, depending on the context (Nugent 1993:34). In political Bolivarian discourse it commonly refers to “the poor” or the popular sectors, having an implicit historical reference to oppression and marginalization.
3. In 2005, at the fifth annual gathering of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in front of a crowd of 15,000 people, Chávez declared himself a socialist. He also made it clear that in his view the way forward was not the dogmatic socialism of the past, but a gradual search for what he called “Socialism for the twenty-first century.”
4. “Populist” is one of the milder characteristics. The US media in particular used a strong language to describe him. Adjectives used include “would-be dictator,” “authoritarian ruler,” “autocrat,” “petro-dictator,” “indomitable strongman,” “brutal neo-authoritarian,” “warmonger,” and “caudillo” (see Bhatt 2014).

5. Theoretically, he weaves together “theories of underdevelopment, neo-classical views of natural resources, the Marxist theory of value and an analysis of the evolution of oil prices in this century” (Coronil 1997:6) as well as modernization and subalternity theories, seeking to “unsettle the illusion that [Venezuela’s] history can be contained within fixed theoretical, temporal, or cultural boundaries” (Coronil 1997:xi).
6. The term “Puntofijo” refers to a political pact (the pact of Punto Fijo, from the place where it was signed) between the two dominant parties, Acción Democrática (Social Democrats) and COPEI (Christian Democrats). It was signed in 1959, and lasted until 1998 when Chávez came to power. The Puntofijo era or *puntofijismo* is interchangeably referred to as the Fourth Republic and its powerholders are referred to as *cuartarepublicanos* (fourth republicans).
7. Over time, most barrio dwellers manage to gradually build up a house made of brick and zinc, but a total of 13,610 homes in Caracas and Greater Caracas were classified as *ranchos* in the 2011 national census, defined as a construction built with waste materials, such as wooden boards, cartons and so on (Universidad de los Andes n.d.).
8. A five-year-old girl I know dressed in a mini-skirt looks at her behind in the mirror and says: “I have to continue with my swimming lessons; it gives me nice thighs and lifts my buttocks.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Azzelini, Dario. 2013. The Communal State: Communal Councils, Communes and Workplace Democracy. *NACLA* 46 (2): 25–30.
- Bhatt, Keane. 2014 [2013]. The New York Times on Venezuela and Honduras: A Case of Journalistic Misconduct. *NACLA*, May 8. <https://nacla.org/article/new-york-times-venezuela-and-honduras-case-journalistic-misconduct>. Accessed February 20, 2017.
- Ciccariello-Maher, George. 2013. *We Created Chávez: A People’s History of the Venezuelan Revolution*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- . 2016. *Building the Commune. Radical Democracy in Venezuela*. London and New York: Verso.
- Collier, Paul, and Anke Hoeffler. 1998. On Economic Causes of Civil War. *Oxford Economic Papers* 50 (4): 563–573.
- . 2000. *Greed and Grievances in Civil War*. Washington, DC: World Bank, Development Research Group.

- . 2005. Resource Rents, Governance, and Conflict. *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49 (4): 625–633.
- Coronil, Fernando. 1997. *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Corrales, Javier, and Michael Penfold. 2011. *Dragon in the Tropics. Hugo Chávez and the Political Economy of Revolution in Venezuela*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Ellner, Steve. 2010. *Rethinking Venezuelan Politics. Class, Conflict, and the Chávez Phenomenon*. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Escobar, Arturo. 2010. Latin America at a Crossroad. *Cultural Studies* 24 (1): 1–65.
- Fernandes, Sujatha. 2010. *Who Can Stop the Drums? Urban Social Movements in Chávez' Venezuela*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1991. Governmentality. In *The Anthropology of the State. A Reader*, ed. A. Sharma and A. Gupta. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Fukuyama, Francis. 1992. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York, London, Toronto, Sydney: Free Press.
- Gledhill, John. 2000. *Getting New Bearings in the Labyrinth: The Transformation of the Mexican State and the Real Chiapas*. Lecture manuscript, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Manchester.
- Gupta, Akhil. 1995. Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State. In *The Anthropology of the State. A Reader*, ed. A. Sharma and A. Gupta. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Hansen, Thomas Blom, and Finn Stepputat. 2001. Introduction: States of Imagination. In *States of Imagination. Ethnographic Explorations of the Postcolonial State*, ed. T.B. Hansen and F. Stepputat. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Karl, Terry Lynn. 1997. *The Paradox of Plenty. Oil Booms and Petro-States*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lambek, Michael. 2011. Catching the Local. *Anthropological Theory* 11 (2): 197–221.
- Lazar, Sian. 2008. *El Alto, Rebel City. Self and Citizenship in Andean Bolivia*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Lindisfarne, Nancy. 2008. Starting from Below. Fieldwork, Gender and Imperialism Now. In *Taking Sides. Ethics, Politics and Fieldwork in Anthropology*, ed. H. Armbruster and A. Lærke. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Logan, Owen, and John-Andrew McNeish. 2012. Rethinking Responsibility and Governance in Resource Extraction. In *Flammable Societies. Studies on the Socio-economics of Oil and Gas*, ed. J.-A. McNeish and O. Logan. London: Pluto Press.
- Lupu, Noam. 2010. Who Votes for “Chavismo”? Class Voting in Hugo Chávez’s Venezuela. *Latin American Research Review* 45 (1): 7–32.

- McCoy, Jennifer L., and David J. Myers. 2004. *The Unraveling of Representative Democracy in Venezuela*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Mommer, Bernhard. 1996. Integrating the Oil: A Structural Analysis of Petroleum in the Venezuelan Economy. *Latin American Perspectives* 23 (3): 132–158.
- . 2004. Subversive Oil. In *Venezuelan Politics in the Chávez Era: Class, Polarization, and Conflict*, ed. S. Ellner and D. Hellinger. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Nugent, Daniel. 1993. *Spent Cartridges of Revolution. An Anthropological History of Namiquirepa, Chihuahua*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Nuijten, Monique. 2003. *Power, Community, and the State. The Political Anthropology of Organization in Mexico*. London and Sterling, VA: Pluto Press.
- Pérez Alfonzo, Juan Pablo. 2011 [1976]. *Hundiéndonos en el excremento del diablo*. Caracas: Banco Central de Venezuela.
- Rogers, Douglas. 2015. Oil and Anthropology. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44: 365–380.
- Rosser, Andrew. 2006. Escaping the Resource Curse. *New Political Economy* 11 (4): 557–570.
- Sachs, Jeffrey D., and Andrew Warner. 1995. *Natural Resource Abundance and Economic Growth*. Working Paper 5398, National Bureau of Economic Research and Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
- . 2001. The Curse of Natural Resources. *European Economic Review* 45 (4–6): 827–838.
- Salas, Miguel Tinker. 2009. *The Enduring Legacy. Oil, Culture, and Society in Venezuela*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Scott, James. 1999. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Smilde, David, and Daniel Hellinger. 2011. *Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy. Participation, Politics, and Culture under Chávez*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Universidad de los Andes, Venezuela. n.d. *Conceptos y definiciones de población y vivienda*. http://iies.faces.ula.ve/censo90/Conceptos_definiciones_de_poblaci%C3%B3n_vivienda.html. Accessed February 20, 2017.
- Valencia, Cristobal. 2015. *We Are the State! Barrio Activism in Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press.

Open Access This chapter is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, duplication, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

