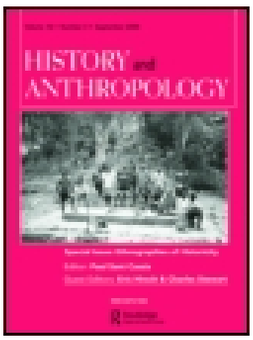

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Iselin Åsedotter Strønen

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Venezuela's oil specter: Contextualizing and historicizing the Bolivarian attempt to sow the oil

Iselin Åsedotter Strønen

Department of Social Anthropology, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway

ABSTRACT

Under the late Hugo Chávez' rule in Venezuela, the country's oil dependency was framed as a pernicious condition to overcome, at the same time as oil became a centerpiece for his social, political and symbolic nation-building project called 'the Bolivarian process'. This article disentangles this multifaceted ambiguity through an exploration of how the near-90 years old Venezuelan political dictum of 'sowing the oil' was conceptualized under Chávez' rule, situated within a historical analysis of the role of oil in Venezuela's state formation, development trajectories and societal configurations throughout the twentieth century. Through entering into dialogue with the late Fernando Coronil's extensive work on Venezuela, this article approaches Venezuela's project of nation-building under Chávez as a reflection of the conditions and contradictions embedded in the country's post-colonial, natural resource-exporting constitution. It is argued that a historical and structural analysis is indispensable for understanding the Bolivarian process' conception and demise.

KEYWORDS

Venezuela; oil; Hugo Chávez; Bolivarian process; state; capitalism

> No event in Venezuela can be separated from oil …
> It is the fundamental force that shapes national life.
> All aspects of the Venezuelan economy are the legitimate or bastard children of that substance that
> irrevocably stained our history. Domingo Alberto Rangel, cited in Tinker Salas (2009, 2)

Introduction

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, under the leadership of the late Hugo Chávez (1954–2013), Venezuela experienced fast-paced poverty reduction and high rates of economic growth propped up by windfall oil revenues. Now, the country that harbours the largest known oil reserves on the planet, is facing the most acute economic and social crisis in the Western hemisphere. During the past years, in trying to explain the background for the crisis, many academics, including myself, have stated in a typical journalist-friendly succinct fashion; that 'Chávez didn't manage to change the country's oil reliance, and rather, aggravated it'. This is typically added to variations

CONTACT Iselin Åsedotter Strønen iselin.stronen@uib.no

over 'the Chávez-government's mismanagement of the economy' and 'partisan appropriation and undermining of the state apparatus'. Whilst these explanatory tropes are true per se, this article grows out of a dissatisfaction with their simplicity and lack of historical and contextual texture.

Venezuela under Hugo Chávez's presidency (1999–2013) spearheaded the so-called Pink Tide that swept over large parts of Latin America shortly after the turn of the millennium. Chávez' political project, first termed the Bolivarian revolution or Bolivarian process (named after the national icon and hero from the Wars of Independence, Simón Bolívar), and later Socialism for the twenty-first century, was an amalgamation of anti-neoliberal and nationalist ideology and politics, of experiments with participative democracy, and of social redistribution of oil wealth to the country's marginalized and disenfranchised populations. Chávez inspired enormous mobilization and support from the country's popular sectors, at the same time as opposition to his rule – mainly drawn from the middle- and upper classes and the old political and economic elites – was equally fierce.

The current crisis in Venezuela is challenging to grasp. The ideological polarization surrounding it, both domestically and internationally, is reminiscent of the Cold War. The causes-and-effects of the nation's economic downfall are complex and debated, and the political game is steeped in behind-the-scenes maneuvering and a host of shadow actors. This involves not only regional big political players such as Colombia and Brazil and organizations such as the Organization of American States (OAS), but it has also increasingly become a game of big politics involving diverging political and economic interests between the U.S., on the one hand, and Venezuelan allies Russia and China. But in simple terms, the crisis stems from a toxic mix of falling international oil prices, failed government policies, Hugo Chávez premature death,[1] corruption, increasing authoritarianism, domestic political conflicts, attempts of 'regime change', and, in later years, US sanctions towards the Venezuelan economy. In more complex terms, I suggest, the crisis reflects Venezuela's continuous inability to carve out a stable political, social and economic base both domestically and within the global post-colonial capitalist architecture. The country's possession of oil represents the point of convergence in this conundrum.

Domestic academic scholarship on Venezuela as well as political discourse and intellectual-artistic expressions have – with varying intensity depending on the political and economic conjuncture – throughout the twentieth century exhibited grave concerns with the effects of oil upon Venezuelan society. Rómulo Betancourt, considered as the 'founding father' of the democratic era starting in 1959, introduced to Congress the draft for a new Petroleum Law in 1975 with the words: 'It is a much disseminated opinion that oil awakes the worst passions, awakes a more devouring greed in the men of business than the passion of Gold, and incites the men of the State to follow Maquiavellian plans' (Betancourt 1975, 10, author's translation from Spanish).[2]

Juan Peréz Alfonzo, a lawyer, diplomat and politician, as well as minister for mines and hydrocarbons during Betancourt's second government (1959–1964), famously stated that 'We are drowning in the Devil's excrements'. These words have become an allegorical trope in Venezuela (in 2011, the Venezuelan Central Bank (BCV) reprinted a new edition of Alfonzo's book, first published in 1976, with the same title). A sense of looming doom is also found in the words of the renowned intellectual and politician Arturo Uslar Pietri:

> Petroleum is the fundamental and basic fact of the Venezuelan destiny. It presents to Venezuela today the most serious national problem that the nation has known in its history. It is like the Minotaur of ancient myths, it the depths of his labyrinth, ravenous and threatening. The vital historical theme for today's Venezuela can be no other than the productive combat with the Minotaur of petroleum. Everything else loses significance. Whether the voters vote white or any other color. Whether they build aqueduct or not. Whether the University is opened or closed. Whether immigrants come or don't come. Whether schools are built or not built. Whether the workers earn five bolivares or fifteen bolivares. All those issues lack meaning. Because they are all conditioned, determined, created by petroleum. They are all dependent and transitory. Dependent and transitory. 'Petroleum and nothing else is the theme of Venezuela's contemporary history'. (Arturo Uslar Pietri, cited in Ewell 1984, 61)

Uslar Pietri is also the father of the most central political master narrative in Venezuela for more than eight decades; the imperative of 'sowing the oil' as he formulated it as early as in 1936 (Uslar Pietri 1936). The phrase refers to 'sowing' oil revenues into other economic activities in order to diversify the economy and escape oil dependency. As we will explore below, the concept of 'sowing the oil' also operated as a justificative and rationale during Chávez' tenure for a broad array of policies and plans aimed at amending the country's social frailties and restructuring its productive and economic base. Nevertheless, oil dependency was aggravated during and after Chávez' presidency, counting for approximately 98 percent of export earnings in 2017[3] and heavily contributing to Venezuela's economic crisis offset by the global fall in oil prices in 2014.

The apparent paradox between, on the one hand, aiming for overcoming oil dependency and at the same time deepening it, was evidently also present prior to the onset of the economic crisis. Chávez frequently decried the capitalist extractive paradigm, which he accused of causing misery, injustice, and the destruction of the planet. At the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in 2009, he stated that 'Capitalism is a destructive development model that is putting an end to life; it threatens to put a definitive end to the human species' (VoltaireNet 2009). In his speech, he argued for the largest and richest consumer countries to make binding and concrete commitments to reducing emissions in parallel with supporting poor countries in mitigating the effects of climate change. Chávez never mentioned oil in his speech, nor problematized that he himself presided over a major oil producing country. However, based on his rhetoric, his view seemed to be that it was the developed and large consumer countries (which he referred to as politically conservative, selfish, insensitive and in lack of solidarity with the poor) that had the foremost responsibility for cutting emission; it would be unfair to pull up the ladder for poor countries still struggling to develop. It perhaps then makes more sense that Chávez politically, economically and symbolically fashioned his model of twenty-first century Socialism as a form of petro-socialism (Plaza 2016). Oil – which Chávez (wrongly) predicted would continue to sell at high prices – would be 'sown' in order to ultimately transform the oil-dependent capitalist systemic underpinning of the Venezuelan state.

Whilst harsh criticism of extractive capitalism in par with increasing oil reliance at first glance might appear as demagogic doublespeak, I suggest that it is not that simple. Rather, I suggest that the gap between stated ideological ambitions and actual political and economic unfoldings has to be understood in the context of the multiple conflictive demands and conditions facing the Bolivarian process: confronted with the colonial legacy of lacking social development, entrenched social inequalities, and diverging class interests,

as well as economic and productive structures cemented over the best part of the last 100 years, how could the Venezuelan petro-state overcome those obstacles, reduce its oil dependency, diversify the economy and achieve a more sovereign position within the global economy at the same time?

In this article, I will disentangle how these obstacles, as well as strategies to overcome them, were envisioned and enacted from within the Bolivarian process. I must however clarify that the primary purpose of this article is not to show what was intended and to state the obvious; that it failed spectacularly. Nor is it to present empirical evidence for the exact causes-and-effects leading to the discrepancy between stated ambitions and actual outcomes. Neither is it to disentangle the full spectrum of the broader political panorama and structural underpinnings interfering with governance during the Chávez-era.[4]

Rather, the aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the political, social and historical moment that the 'oil-sowing' Bolivarian project represented, and to interpret this epoch in relation to the historical trajectory of the Venezuelan petro-state. I will do so, in part, by revisiting the work of the late Fernando Coronil (1944–2011), who brings attention to the importance of going beyond simplified and Eurocentric depictions of a pathological third world oil-state, or alternatively the more individualized version; a pathological populist petro president/autocrat. Indeed, I read Coronil's analytical approach as an indispensable reminder of interpreting Venezuela's formation as a state and a society as unalienable from the country's uneven amalgamation into global geopolitics and global capitalist markets. Amalgamation, because as an oil-exporting country it is central to the flow of black gold so vital to global capitalist development. And uneven, because as a post-colonial, semi-peripheral, oil-exporting country, its political, economic and cultural assemblages have been intrinsically interwoven with forces and processes whose loci originates from the global West. These dialectic intertwinements have not only created particular national tropes, imaginative horizons, and practices encapsulated in Coronil's infamous concept 'the Magical State' (Coronil 1997), but it has also brought cycles and patterns of social and political conflict and full-blown crisis.

The rest of the article is structured as follows: the subsequent section discusses the anthropology of oil more broadly and anthropological scholarship on oil in Venezuela in particular. This is followed by an analysis of key political, social and economic trajectories in Venezuela since oil was discovered in 1914, before I move on to exploring how 'sowing the oil' as an idiom for structural, socio-political and cultural transformations was envisioned and sought enacted during Chávez' rule. In the last section, I enter into dialogue with Fernando Coronil's work in order to explore how we may better understand the particular ideological project that the Bolivarian process represented, and also perhaps then gain a deeper understanding of the deep-seated challenges that it was up against. The article is based upon interviews and ethnographic data gathered in the course of almost two years of residency and fieldwork in Venezuela in the period between 2005 and 2015, in addition to a broad reading of secondary literature.

The anthropology of oil

Efforts to understand the interconnected and pervasive effects of oil have been central for the now bourgeoning scholarship of the anthropology of oil and energy (see for example,

Mitchell 2011; Behrends, Reyna, and Schlee 2011; Logan and McNeish 2012; Rogers 2015; Appel, Mason, and Watts 2015). This scholarship emerged partially in opposition to economistic and political science-oriented approaches to oil. Key concepts emerging from these disciplines have been the so-called Dutch Disease, the rentier state, and the resource curse. Whilst the Dutch Disease refers to a process whereby revenues from natural resource exports depreciates the currency and undermines domestic productive industry, the rentier state refers to a state dependent upon income from renewable resources, with neo-patrimonialism and corruption as the result (Behrends and Schareika 2010, 84). The resource curse theory encapsulates a broad body of literature that in summary makes a causal correlation between on the one hand, high dependency upon natural resource export revenues, and on the other hand, high poverty rates, distorted democracy- and institution building, political instability, wars and civil conflicts (Ross 2004; Rosser 2006; Collier and Hoeffler 2005; Auty 1993). From an anthropological perspective, these approaches have their weaknesses. For one, they are too state-centered, thereby blurring the broader historical, structural and political configurations that shape national oil regimes and societal development, including external economic actors and financial regimes that instigate the form and actions of the state. Secondly, they lack ethnographic texture that explains how political, social and economic processes and dynamics are saturated with cultural and symbolic meaning. Thirdly, and importantly, they are not sufficiently attentive to colonial legacies, neo-colonialism, and regimes of power/knowledge. In contrast, uncovering relations and dynamics of power has been at the heart of anthropological approaches to oil. Reyna and Behrends (2008), for example, have proposed 'crude domination' as a guiding concept emphasizing how inquires into oil must uncover different structures and modalities of domination amongst differently positioned actors who are competing for controlling and accessing oil wealth or are left out of the benefits (but nevertheless desire them). A sizable body of literature has been dedicated to exploring how oil operations generate resistance and social disruptions in and adjacent to extractive operations; throwing into sharp relief the disparate power relations between the globalized oil industry and local communities (Sawyer 2004; Watts 2012; Guzmán-Gallegos 2012; Behrends and Hoinathy 2017). Another central focus has been on the materiality of oil through the vast and complex technological, financial, infrastructural and organizational assemblages that its extraction, production, management, commodification and consummation generate (Mitchell 2011; Watts 2012). Cross-cutting diverse analytical inroads, a central *geist* in the literature has been to stress the importance of ethnographic method in order to capture the complexities of how oil animates heterogeneous symbolic representations, cultural models, temporal horizons and social relations in diverse, but not temporally nor spatially bounded settings (Apter 2001; Coronil 1997; Behrends, Reyna, and Schlee 2011; Logan and McNeish 2012; Appel, Mason, and Watts 2015). Seen together, the growing body of literature carves out a complex story about oil-as-energy, oil-as-rents, and oil-as-a-commodity as encompassing components and enablers of the era of global capitalist modernity. Concurrently, it reveals that oil in its diverse forms offsets multiplex and compound cultural, societal, ecological and political processes whose connection to oil at first glance might come across as 'apparently disparate or discordant' (Mitchell 2009, 422) but which nevertheless can be traced back to the ubiquity of oil in our age.

A key characteristic of petroleum resource extraction is its vast revenue potential, yet also extremely costly, territorialized and at the same time internationalized production regimes. The history of global oil production is also the history of the rise of global oil companies and their interlinkages with national and global politics (Yergin 2008). This relation (which also Coronil's account about the Venezuelan oil-state brings home) compels us to include in our inceptive analytical framework that a country in possession of large quantities of non-renewable natural resources, is configured in relation to the global economy in a particular manner because its status as a landlord state makes it distinctly significant for international capital, and in turn, global relations of power. Consequently, these countries also become particularly vulnerable to fluctuations in the global economy and global financial markets. For countries in the so-called global South, the relationship to the global political economy takes on a different character than for countries in the global North. In emblematic oil-states in the global South, such as Venezuela, Nigeria, and Angola, the countries' development as oil states was entangled with their post-colonial and /or liberation processes, and henceforth also with their permutations into so-called modern nation states. The early presence of international oil companies in the establishment and build-up of the oil industry had significant impact upon nation building processes and international relations. By comparison; in a country such as Norway, the build-up of oil production (in which international oil companies were deeply involved) and the oil economy occurred in the aftermath of the establishment of key political, legal and social institutions, as well as in a context of (relative) political independence within the political sphere of the global North. This provided Norway with the possibility of not only crafting a petroleum governance regime within the parameters of established political principles and institutions, and to have a 'controlled' inflow and allocation of oil-revenues vis-à-vis other economic sectors, but it also gave the country more political clout to set the terms of engagement with the international petroleum industry. In contrast, the oil industry and the oil economy in Venezuela developed in a completely contrasting political, historical, social and global setting, engendering different development trajectories and restricted scopes of maneuvers.

A focus on institution building features prominently in Terry Lynn Karl's analysis of the petro-state, outlined in the Paradox of Plenty (1997) with Venezuela as a key example. She argues that oil inflows prior to institution building generated distorted institutional set-ups, political economies and productive apparatuses, engendering rent-seeking, detrimental capital flows, and path-dependencies locking the Venezuelan petro-state into perpetuating its oil reliance. Her work is highly instructive for understanding how institutions, financial models and interests groups were conceived, shaped and evolved in the Venezuelan case. However, analysis of state building also needs anthropological texture that illuminates how Venezuela's development as a petro-state dialectically shaped the cultural, symbolic and social dimensions of the country's evolvement into a 'modern nation state'.

Oil and coloniality

Anthropological literature on oil in Venezuela from the twentieth century (and anthropological literature in general) is relatively scant. In 1972, the renowned Venezuelan anthropologist Rodolfo Quintero published the book 'The Anthropology of Oil' (also reprinted by

the Venezuelan Central Bank (BCV) in 2014) where he argued that foreign oil monopolies' encroachment of oil resources in the third world not only created dependency and underdevelopment, but also that it was a form of cultural imperialism engendering cultural alienation. Drawing on ethnographic research in Venezuela, Quintero wrote, somehow preceding the anthropology of oil of today as regards the intertwinement of the material, cultural and symbolic aspects of oil:

> The culture of oil is a pattern of life with its own structures and defense resources; of social and psychological modalities and effects that deteriorate the 'creole' cultures, expressed in activities, inventions, instruments, material equipment and non-material factors; language, arts, science. It configures well-marked features, originated in a defined context: the explotation of our oil by monopolistic foreign capital companies. (Quintero [1972] 2014, 45, author's translation from Spanish)

He coined 'the culture of oil' a 'culture of conquest', and argued for decolonialization, which he viewed as:

> Eliminating contradictions between our nation and the metropolis, produced by relations of domination and subordination. Venezuela cannot continue in a good rhythm as long as it is a dependent country; national cultures and subcultures will flourish without limitations only if the dominance of the culture of conquest vanishes, that is, through a process of petroleum deculturalization. (Quintero [1972] 2014, 197, author's translation from Spanish)

Parts of Quintero's ethnographic endeavors took place in the oil camps set up by foreign companies, where he observed that new racial, occupational, territorial, gendered and cultural hierarchies were carved out. This aspect was further illuminated by Miguel Tinker Salas in 'The Enduring Legacy. Oil, Culture, and Society in Venezuela' (2009) through a historically contextualized analysis of how the foreign oil industry radically altered Venezuelan society. 'The [oil] industry residential complexes were a social laboratory where companies promoted labour practices, notions of citizenship, and an accompanying worldview that favoured their continued operation in Venezuela' (Tinker-Salas 2009; xiii). He shows how notions of class, race and gender were altered and reinterpreted not only through the introduction of new labour regimes, but also of new values and practices tied to leisure, family, aesthetic, consumption and lifestyles. Concurrently, nationalist sentiments were muffled, and a new dominant imagery of oil-saturated Venezuelan oil modernity emerged.

The oil/modernity-nexus is also the central axis of analysis in the undoubtedly most infamous monograph about Venezuela; the already mentioned 'The Magical State. Nature, Money and Modernity in Venezuela' (Coronil 1997). The book historicizes the formation of Venezuelan oil society within the evolving weavings of a form of global modernity that Coronil approaches by treating 'the so-called periphery as the site of subaltern modernities rather than as the region where traditional cultures are embraced by Western progress' (Coronil 1997, 8). As I read him, his project is to break down the dichotomization between Western and non-Western, Self and Others in the formation of dominant global modernity; not to obscure hegemony but in order to tell a more complex story about how the historicity and contemporaneity of this paradigm hinge upon a relationship and dialectic of unequal exchange that is founded upon and perpetuates power/knowledge emanating from the West. Unpacking the material, financial and political underpinnings of the global world order, and Venezuela's location in it, he shows how post-colonial

geopolitics and global financial set-ups shaped the political and economic tosses and turns, booms and busts of the Venezuelan oil nation; impacting not only politics per se, but also moral economies, regimes of value and an increasing abyss between the governing and the governed.

These books were based on research prior to the 1998 election of Hugo Chávez. During the first decade or so of his presidential rule, ethnographic oriented research focused primarily on bottom-up democracy and the evolvement of grassroots movements under Chávez' tenure (Fernandes 2010; Ciccariello-Maher 2013; Velasco 2015; Valencia 2015). Explorations of the role of oil in the Bolivarian process have gradually emerged as a central topic in recent years (Kingsbury 2016; Strønen 2017; Plaza 2016; Penfield 2019; but see Schiller 2011). Penfield (2019), for example, explores how indigenous groups' relation to national society and the global economy was reconfigured through the trickling-down of oil wealth under the Venezuelan Bolivarian state. 'Oil seeps into political possibilities and civil imaginaries in ways that cannot be overestimated, even for ostensibly isolated indigenous communities' (Penfield 2019, 77), she argues. Kingsbury (2016), on his part, merges Anibal Quijano's concept 'the coloniality of power' with Coronil's work, arguing that Venezuela's elites have been locked in a self-defeating subject position which he describes as the coloniality of oil; being defined by oil but simultaneously constantly striving to 'transcend its status as a petrostate' by way of the national project of development (Kingsbury 2016, 77). However, he argues, coloniality and its logic of place, race and development cannot be transcended by way of the parameters within which it is constituted; 'In a world system structured by coloniality, development is a forever fleeting horizon' (Kingsbury 2016, 77). He perceives the election of Hugo Chávez as a decolonizing moment, with the subsequent focus on autogestión (self-management, which in Venezuela referred to bottom-up organization in communities and workplaces) and the coming-of-age of a new self-understanding and self-valorization amongst Venezuela's former subjected and marginalized populations (Kingsbury 2016, 77). He views the developmental efforts of the Venezuelan state under Chávez, and current president Maduro's electoral reversals as beside the point; the coloniality of oil is not defeated by the state, but rather measured by the extent to which political change is driven from below by new subjectivities challenging the logic of coloniality (Kingsbury 2016, 90).

I concur with Kingsbury's assessment of subaltern radical change as being the most important and most critical feature of the Bolivarian process. However, I believe that it is of paramount importance to understand how transformation from below were crafted in a dynamic – yet often deeply contradictory – relationship with the state, and how the coloniality of oil, if we apply Kingsbury's term, was both contested and reproduced by the state. Hereof, one of the missing pieces in the literature, I suggest, is an exploration of the imaginary and political transmutations and reenactments of the 'eternal ethos' of 'sowing the oil' in the context of the 'Bolivarian' historical juncture. This is important because 'sowing the oil' came to stand for not only grandiose large-scale state-led development plans (which is nothing new in Venezuelan history), but also social investments in the name of social justice as well as struggles for cultural decolonialization and national sovereignty. Hence, the Bolivarian 'sowing oil' project mimicked that of the Venezuelan state's earlier developmental ambitions, at the same time as its specific expression (and outcomes) reflected the configurations of a particular set of circumstances in Venezuela's post-colonial history. As Heraclitus noted, you cannot

step down in the same river twice, and in what follows, I will try to contextualize and unpack the particularities of the Bolivarian process' sediments and waterflows. This endeavor, I hope, represents a contribution to the anthropology of oil through painting up a broad canvas of the intertwined symbolic, political and economic role of oil in Venezuela within the context of different historical junctures, geo-political constellations and social dynamics.

From Punto Fijo to Chávez

Chávez' rose to power at the heels of nearly two decades of increasing social and political unrest, underpinned by a prolonged economic and social crisis since the early 1980s. Venezuela experienced an unprecedented oil boom during the 1970s, primarily caused by the Arab oil embargo and ensuing high oil prices. This precipitated an epoch which Uslar Pietri has dubbed 'the great national oil drunkenness party (gran borrachera nacional de petróleo)' (1989, 108). Then-president Carlos Andrés Pérez introduced a grandiose project of state transformations – also taking inspiration from the 'sowing the oil'-dictum. The plan, dubbed Gran Venezuela (Great Venezuela) ultimately turned into a debt crisis, bundle of white elephants and a corruption epidemic (Coronil 1997). In the early 1980s, the economy crumbled. The government had to devaluate the *bolívar* in 1983, and a long slope of economic downturn, mismanagement and chaos, as well as increasing poverty and economic inequalities followed. In 1989, Carlos Andrés Pérez was elected for a second term, vowing to revive the prosperity of the 1970. Instead, he brokered a backroom austerity deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which unleashed a spontaneous riot amongst the popular sectors. The *Caracazo*, as the riot was called, was brutally suppressed by the government. The death toll is to this date still not verified, but it runs in the several hundred, possibly thousands. The Caracazo marked a definite rupture between the political elites and the popular sectors, at the same time as it outraged radical elements within the Armed Forces; amongst them then-Lieutenant Coronel Hugo Chávez. In 1992, he led a failed rebellion and attempted coup against the Pérez-government. He was imprisoned, but released in 1994, upon which he formed the political party Movimiento Quinta República (Fifth Republic Movement) and won the presidential elections in December 1998 with 56 percent of the vote.

Chávez' presidency marked a rupture with a political elite pact that had been in place since 1959, when the last military dictator, General Marcos Pérez Jímenez, fled the country. The Punto Fijo-pact as it was called, was a power-sharing pact between the two dominant parties; the Social Democratic Acción Democrática and the Cristian Democrats COPEI, designed to shut out the political left. Oil is a central factor for explaining the long durée of the Punto Fijo system. As Hawkins notes: 'The oil revenues allowed the hegemonic parties to develop an extensive network of clientelist networks, creating mechanisms whereby new political actors were either co-opted or excluded' (2010, 89). Potentially radical elements were kept at bay (either with carrot or stick), while powerful interest groups and the dominant ascending political base – the middle classes – were kept satisfied through being pampered with access to oil filled state coffins, lucrative business opportunities, access to state jobs, and venues for social mobility. During the Puntofijo-period between 1959 until Chávez' election in 1998, a narrative of class compromise and racial democracy was crafted that gradually imploded from the inside with the

prolonged crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. Structurally, Venezuela developed into an emblematic oil state, with rural abandonment, exceptionally high urbanization rates,[5] high import dependency, and what Karl (1997) terms 'petrolization'; the formation and empowerment of oil-related interest groups to the expense of non-oil-related interest.

The formation of an oil state

Venezuela's oil adventure started with the discovery of the first oil well near Lake Maracaibo in 1914. By the 1930s, the country was one of the largest oil producers in the world, and a few years later, the recently predominantly agricultural country had become a net importer of food (Tinker Salas 2015, 66). Foreign oil companies controlled the build-up of the oil industry, taking place under the regime (1908-1935) of the *caudillo* (military strongman) Juan Vicente Gómez. In 1928, there were 107 companies working in Venezuela, but the big three – Dutch Shell, Gulf, and Standard Oil – controlled 98 percent of the market (Ewell 1984, 63). The first state oil company, Corporación Venezolana de Petroleo, was not created until 1960 (Mommer 1996). That same year, delegates from Venezuela, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iran and Iraq gathered in Baghdad. Few days later, OPEC was formed (Grisanti n.d.). The Venezuelan delegate, Juan Pablo Pérez Alfonso who is referred to above, played a crucial role in this process. The Venezuelan oil industry was not nationalized until 1976, under the first government of Carlos Andrés Pérez (Bye 1979). However, international oil companies continued profiting from the Venezuelan oil industry through lucrative service contracts, indemnification, expensive loans, foreign investment diverted to other economic sectors and other mechanisms (Bye 1979, 73). Moreover, in spite of nationalization, the national oil company maintained a corporate culture socialized by and adopted from the foreign oil companies (Tinker-Salas 2009). Over time, the national state oil company Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PdVSA) developed into a 'state within the state' governing itself largely free from state interference. In exchange for delivering oil revenue for government policies, oil executives 'were left to chart the course of PdVSA and insulated themselves from rancorous public debates by framing oil industry policy as the exclusive purview of an elite group of qualified oil experts' (Tinker-Salas 2005, 52).

However, despite the meritocratic and professional self-imagery of PdVSA-executives, many Venezuelans held their performance in lower regard. Rather, a view of the company as intransparent, self-serving (rather than nation-serving), and as a milking cow for the equally self-serving and indulgent middle- and over classes gradually took hold. As Tinker Salas writes:

> For a great number of Venezuelans, PdVSA embodied much of what had gone wrong with the nation- a legacy of squandered wealth and a managerial class and privileged labour elite whose experiences stood in stark contrast to the lives of most common people. (2005, 52)

Whilst increasing shares of the population struggled for their everyday survival, PdVSA staff, famous for their high-profile and excessive conspicuous consumption, went on shopping trips to Miami in PdVSA airplanes. Meanwhile, the economy was progressively privatized during the 1990s, opening up the country for the penetration of foreign capital and creating a series of scandals that reverberated throughout Venezuela as evidence for the

nation's elites' lack of compromise with the nation and their less fortunate countrymen- and women. As Coronil writes with regards to a severe banking crisis in the mid-1990s:

> Since the traditional elite was implicated in the financial crisis, the [previous distinction between reputable businessmen and unprincipled speculators] became untenable. As a depositor in the Metropolitan Bank who lost his savings stated bitterly about the trust he had placed in the bank's board of directors: 'They were members of the country's business aristocracy. They were the best names. Honest people, people with blue blood'. But now he regarded them as people who 'don't have a country'. As he puts it: their country is money. (1997, 382)

These words encapsulate a dominant feeling at the time; that the country's elites, the Punto Fijo generation, had succumbed to a wicked dance around the golden calf; a dance that had made greed and selfishness eat its way into politics like cancer. The nominal social contract that had reigned since 1959 between the rulers and the ruled had been torn apart. This paved the way for the election of Hugo Chávez, who through the attempted coup against Carlos Andrés Pérez in 1992 had gained a reputation as a man of moral convictions and integrity who was willing to confront the ruling classes on behalf of *el pueblo* (the people).

The Bolivarian petro-state

Chávez' predecessor, Rafael Caldera, had launched a partial privatization process in the oil sector called Oil Opening (Apertura Petrolera), which many anticipated would lead to a full privatization of PdVSA. This became a central issue in the 1998 electoral campaign, with Chávez taking a clear stand against privatization. This put him at odds with PdVSA's executive elites, who had incorporated the neoliberal corporate global ethos and pushed for its full privatization. In 1999, the year Chávez took office, a new Constitution was drafted and approved in a popular referendum, in which privatization of PdVSA was made constitutionally illegal. In 2001, Chávez passed a series of laws by decree, including substantial reforms in the hydrocarbon-sector. Struggles with the leadership and labour- and bureaucratic elites of PdVSA crystallized into full blown-conflicts, until a failed coup in 2002 and a failed lock-out/shutdown of PdVSA in 2002/2003 gave Chávez the upper hand, allowing him to take control over the company. Consequently, contracts with foreign oil companies were re-negotiated, increasing taxes and royalties and securing PdVSA a majority share in all joint ventures. Meanwhile, Chávez had incited a revival of OPEC and oil prices were on the rise. In the following years, PdVSA was symbolically and politically refashioned into 'New PdVSA'; a PdVSA that was put into service for the so-called Bolivarian process that the Chávez-government was spearheading, in alignment with an increasingly vocal and organized base of popular support. At the core of this state-popular alliance was a pledge to repay the Venezuelan state's historical debt to the poor through 'sowing oil' into social and human development; thereby also building a foundation from which a new economic, political and social order could flourish.

These series of events have to be understood in the context of the political game-of-chess that Chávez' ascendance to power unleashed, in which oil, both as a financial asset, a global commodity, and an imaginary symbol for citizenship, nationhood, justice and sovereignty, became a centerpiece for struggle. The government's take-over of PdVSA, which also included firing 18.000 disloyal blue-collar workers after the 2002/

2003 oil strike/sabotage, had detrimental accumulative effects on the company which contributed to the weakening of the oil sector that has partly impelled Venezuela's economic collapse in recent years. In hindsight, it is therefore tempting to simply conclude that Chávez, by taking over the company in the aftermath of the 2003 showdown, put the company on a course that eventually run it into the ground. However, for the purpose of historical understanding, it is also important to comprehend that at that moment in time, Chávez was facing an acute political crisis and dilemma. Either he would be continuously politically hamstrung by 'the old' PdVSA model and its leadership, who would never, having an essentially neoliberal and anti-nationalist political stance and being accustomed to running the company like a 'state within the state', bend to the government's will. Or, he had to face the battle head on in order to claim the political power and space of maneuver that his sweeping electoral victory had democratically granted him. One of Chávez' successes in terms of oil policy, argues Hellinger (2017), was indeed that he managed to secure a bigger share of the oil revenue pie for the Venezuelan state, and to reassert sovereign control over land (the nation's subsoil). However, a fundamental problem with Chávez' oil policy, as with many of his policies, was the insufficient institutionalization of the PdVSA restructuring: 'insufficient attention was paid to maintaining and developing the productive capacity of PDVSA, increasing the country's dependence on debt and foreign investment in recent years' (Hellinger 2017, 54).

Another economically detrimental effect of the conflict between the Chávez-government and old political elites and capital holders following the 2002/2003 events, was a shift in capital flows and increasing political polarization sustained by both ideological and economic diverging interests:

> Decreased state support and growing number of nationalizations and expropriations have intensified businessmen's fears that the state seeks to reduce the private sector's role. As a result, businessmen have shifted their industrial and agricultural investments to financial and commercial activities or decided to invest their capital abroad. This has led to a port economy sustained by oil income. (Coronil 2019b, 262)

After the PdVSA-takeover, the Chávez-government set out to increase oil production, partly (and paradoxically), by establishing joint ventures with foreign oil companies. Coronil has indicated that this move was a result of political pragmatism and shrewdness on Chávez' side: 'This arrangement offers stability by forming a tight, long-term economic arrangement alliance with powerful actors that otherwise might undermine his regime' (2019b, 264). Through forming alliances with foreign capital, the power of domestic private actors in energy capital was also undermined. At the same time, it allowed Chávez to honour the popular demands underpinning his democratic legitimacy in the eyes of his electorate; to spend oil revenues on paying back the Venezuelan state's historical debt to the poor. But how may we understand the affect of this ethos at that particular moment in time?

The return of the state

Chávez' electoral victory happened within the context of a particular historical epoch in Latin America; one in which the consequences of the neoliberal 'lost decade' for years had fueled growing claims for social justice (Strønen and Ystanes 2017). It also coincided with a particular global political epoch characterized by simmering anti-neoliberal

sentiments that would become a global phenomenon in the form of the so-called anti-globalization movement. This term is somewhat misleading, because what this movement had in its core was indeed a global socio-territorial outlook in many respects. The 'anti' however, consisted of resistance towards the hegemony of global free market capitalism that had reigned for almost two decades.

Situating Chávez' rise to power and the claims from his grassroots support base in this context, helps illuminate why state-led social redistribution as a means to remedy the havoc caused by neoliberalism, gained such ideological and political significance within the Bolivarian process. State-led redistribution – effectively; rolling the state back out – became conceived of as the anti-thesis to the retreating neoliberal state. Oil revenues became the means to this end.

Venezuela was not the only country experiencing reproaches of neoliberal solutions and of the elites that had implemented (and benefited from) them. Demands for national control over the oil sector, and broader redistribution of revenues stemming from these assets, had increasingly gained political and symbolic importance in Latin America 'as neoliberal capitalist globalization has devastated the social fabric of these societies' (Gledhill 2008, 72). This imaginary has historical roots, as Gledhill argues: 'The history of oil indicates that it has long been a central popular symbol of the possibility of creating a country whose wealth is shared' (2008, 58). The increasing delegitimization of PdVSAs modus operandi and its leadership also helps explain the receptiveness among the population to Chávez' nationalist and redistributive oil policy.

Whilst the grassroots supporting Chávez at first was poorly organized, the relationship between the government and the grassroots consolidated after the 2002 coup and 2002/2003 oil strike. Chavez' return to power after the coup had given him significant political clout, the opposition was delegitimized, and international oil prices were on the rise. This set of factors facilitated – economically, politically and ideologically – an unprecedented wave of pro-poor policies financed by oil revenues.

The golden years of oil-sponsored state-building

The years after 2003, before activism fatigue set in, bureaucratic hurdles started to mount and the economic downturn slowly set in, can be characterized as the golden years of the Bolivarian process. A surge in popular participation and mobilization brought the state apparatus and the popular sectors closer together across the country. The shantytowns (*barrios*) in Caracas went through intense political transformations as residents – many with no prior record of activism – started to get engaged in a range of state-led social programmes (called 'missions') focusing on health, education, alimentation, housing and infrastructure, as well as numerous events and opportunities to mobilize in favour of the government and show strength vis-à-vis the defeated opposition.

In the midst of the emerging Bolivarian symbolic universe was the Chávez' government's take-over of PdVSA. The 'new PdVSA' was not only the symbolic locus of a new era of oil sovereignty, but it also took on a significant role as the institutional steward for social policies. PdVSA was thus not only concerned with social development in communities adjacent to oil operations (in line with classic Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) ideology), but also a range of other projects and initiatives without physical proximity to the oil fields. This had the effect of 'effectively establishing PdVSA as the key player in advancing Chávez nationalist, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist model' (Plaza 2016, 25). Consider how Gerardo, a

high-level PdVSA manager working in the social department of the company conceptualized the company's new role in an interview in the PdVSA headquarters in Caracas in 2009:

> We conduct different tasks, and that has to do with the role that PdVSA has in the country, right? For being the most important company in the country, and for the role that PdVSA has to play in the area of social development. That is, PdVSA, in addition to being responsible for the exploration, extraction, production, processing and commercialization of hydrocarbons, right, oil and gas, also has a national responsibility for contributing directly to national development, this is stipulated in the Hydrocarbon Law. And it is stipulated as a mission and a mandate for PdVSAs board of directors. That is, since 2003, PdVSA has fundamentally a more direct commitment not only to contributing with resources but also in direct participation, with its teams and organization, in projects and social programs in the whole country.

Gerardo's choice of words contours a very particular political and ideological rationality that from the outside was often perceived of as populist and merely symbolic; the question as to why PdVSA should engage actively in fomenting social development instead of sticking to oil-and gas development. Though the current CSR-paradigm predicates that extractive industries do have the obligation to leave a 'social footprint', the difference from 'orthodox CSR' was evidently the comprehensive, and politicized and ideological branding of PdVSA as a key engine for social and political transformation in the service of the Bolivarian process. Another dimension of the rationale steering PdVSA can be discerned from another passage in the interview with Gerardo, where I ask him about the concept of 'sowing the oil'.

> The sowing of oil is a call to the consciousness of Venezuelans, right? It is a call for us to be productive, but we have to be productive in the social … social justice … that the wealth actually reaches all Venezuelans. It is easy to talk about wealth like petroleum when this wealth is enjoyed by the few and not by the majority, right? Thus, the issue is not whether there is wealth, but that there is not poverty. And the sowing of oil is a call to our consciousness, it is an historical challenge that we Venezuelans have. That is why we do not want to repeat history, the negative history of 100 years of oil in this country, whereby the oil functioned as an enclave economy in which there were operations, there were services, but [only] in the oil camps. But around [the oil camps] there was misery and poverty, which is still existing, we haven't overcome the problem of poverty in Venezuela and we have this commitment, this challenge, this urgency, this duty that we need to develop [in a spirit of] justice.

The quote above alludes to three core issues; one is the political ideology guiding the rationality of using PdVSA as an instrument for concretizing social development project and thereby national development; it is a contrast to 'the enclave economy' whereby PdVSA habitually operated a just another oil company attending to business and nothing else. Secondly, it evokes the trope of oil wealth as Venezuela's Achilles' heel, her nemesis, in the national political and historical imagination. Thirdly, it points to the moral imperative of using oil revenues for pursuing poverty alleviation and social development; a moral imperative that was the backbone not only for ideas about social justice, but also for the long-term goal of nation-building.

Reversing the curse, sowing the oil

The Chávez-government was not oblivious to the perils of being a 'petro-state' in the economic sense of the word; a country whose economy is too dependent upon oil exports and imports of goods. Indeed, this awareness underpinned the stated rationale for Chávez'

ambitious development plans aimed at redrawing the economic and political architecture of the country.

In 2005, Chávez launched the Plan Siembra Petrolera (Sowing Oil Plan), a 25-year national plan and oil policy. This provided the opening for

> altering the institutional channels of the flow of the rent from PdVSA to the state: instead of transferring oil money to the government to be redistributed to the ministries that oversaw social programmes, PdVSA was put in charge of new government programs. (Plaza 2016, 25)

An important rationale behind this transfer of political and administrative power was that the public sector was renowned for its inefficiency, corruption and intransparancy. Chávez thus hoped that PdVSA would prove more capabel than government ministries in effectuating reforms and policies (Plaza 2016, 26). After a solid victory in the 2006 presidential elections, Chávez launched yet another plan; the National Project Simón Bolívar First Socialist Plan 2007–2013, as well as the Five Motors of the Revolution; a five step strategy designed to restructure the country towards a Venezuelan Socialist model (Plaza 2016, 26). The plans were intended to redraw the country's territorial-political structures and to spur the development of technology, infrastructure, demographic distribution and human resources that would enable a new economic model to take form; one based upon the establishment of new economic sectors and productive structures that eventually would reduce oil dependency and enhance national independence and self-sufficiency.

Upon presenting the strategic plans for PdVSA at the Caracas Hilton Hotel in 2005, including the Sowing the Oil Plan, Chávez conceptualized the linkages between Uslar Pietri's 'sowing the oil' dictum and his government policy in the following way:

> We know that phrase of a distinguished Venezuelan, I respect him a lot and I will respect him as long as I live, Dr. Arturo Uslar Pietri. In that editorial from over there in 1936, if I remember correctly, Uslar said, and let's remember this, 'the oil must be sown' … I was in prison when I remember reading one of his writings, of his many writings. He said, as if rounding off his 90andsomethingyears: 'couldn't we, or didn't we know how, or didn't we want to sow the oil'.

And Chávez continues:

> I propose, in honor of that phrase, and why not, to doctor Uslar and to Juan Pablo Pérez Alfonzo, and to all those who alerted, wrote, said, fought and even died for national oil sovereignty, that we name this plan 2005–2030 Sowing the Oil. So this project will be, from today on, one of the enclaves, of the levers, to carry forward the socialist project, not to prop up the capitalist model of exploitation. That would be contrary to the constitutional mandate and contrary to national interest, but nobody gets scared by this, it's about equality and economic, social and integral development of the country. (Cited in Plaza 2016, 209, translated fom Spanish by the author)

The quote, typical of Chávez' expressive manner of speaking, conveys that he made an association between the historical (and hitherto failed) aim to sow the oil in Venezuela, and his stated ambition to put oil wealth at the center for his objective to break away from the capitalist model. The concept of 'integral development' (desarollo integral) alludes to the holism of the developmental endeavor propounded by the Bolivarian state; a development process taking place on all fronts; in the social and human domain, in infrastructure, in social development policies and in economic reforms. It was a re-foundation of the country and of society that required that 'oil was sown' into various domains simultaneously, because every dimension of society was interconnected

and molded by the previous (capitalist/neoliberal) social and political order, and thus needed to be transformed in order for a new social order to arise. The Chávez-governments' sweeping vision of social transformation found resonance in a grassroots support base that was teeming with enthusiasm in the years following the defeated coup and oil lock-out/sabotage in 2002/2003. Alluding to the by-then global slogan 'another world is possible', many would tell me that Venezuela was at the global forefront in concretizing this 'another world'. People were aware of the long-term horizon for the Bolivarian project, but they nevertheless felt that gains were being made every day, bit by bit. In their home communities, it was visible through the mushrooming of clinics, schools, new infrastructure, cultural arrangements and public events. At the national level, there was not only a gentle breeze of progress in the air, but rather a whirlwind; amplified and broadcasted by the state media's transmission of Chávez' tours across the country where fabrics were being opened, agricultural cooperatives were established, houses were erected, new tractors were assembled, roads were made, train tracks were laid, metros were opened, seeds were being cultivated, and new schools were being inaugurated. Ministries were being frantically reorganized and sought adapted to adjust to new policies and claims for bottom-up participation, whilst ad-hoc organizational structures such as the popular youth organization Frente Francisco de Miranda functioned as a vanguard for concretizing and pushing through the government's goals and ambitions. An informant attached to *el Frente* (literally, the Front), who worked closely with the Ministry of Agriculture, recounted the extensive up-scaling of support to small-scale agriculture during the 'golden years'; during which land reforms were also enacted with great vigor (and to the cost of great political opposition from the traditional landed elites). Young cadres roamed the country to help develop rural infrastructure through setting up silos, extending credit lines, and supporting the formation of agricultural cooperatives. These agricultural reforms harboured enormous obstacles and contradictions (Kappeler 2015), but their expressed rationale was tied to the aim of reducing import dependency and achieving food sovereignty. Key symbolic enterprises were turned into worker-managed enterprises, and the Bolivarian government entered into production- and technology-sharing deals with foreign allies such as Iran and China. Several enterprises that were privatized during the 1990s were re-nationalized in sectors such as banking, telecommunication, electricity and port management, and state-owned production facilities for products ranging from mobile telephones to food items were established. All these endeavors were launched as part of the Bolivarian project of developing and transforming the country, at the same time as it deeply resonated with the time-old ethos of 'sowing the oil'.

As it turned out, the government was unable to properly institutionalize and maintain most of these reforms and projects. The multiply reasons for why merits an entire article (or rather monograph) of its own and can only be briefly mentioned here. Economic features constitutive of the Venezuelan petro-state, such as underdeveloped internal markets and infrastructure, and an overvalued currency, represented evident obstacles to economic and productive transformations. Moreover, corruption and mismanagement flourished, and political turbulence and conflicts were traversing party politics, the state's governing apparatuses, and the economic sectors. The bureaucracy became saturated with contentious politics and opportunistic practices as people belonging to different political allegiances (both pro and contra government), patronage relations and clientelist networks fought to position themselves. In other words, the Venezuelan state, which

was overseeing an enormously ambitious political project in parallel with an giant oil revenue inflow that the country had not seen the like of since the 1970s, was simultaneously steeped in constant power struggles, political subversion, fragmentation of authority, political retailing, and the enactment of state spectacles. In sum, what took place during those years was an example of extraordinary political change and polarization in conjunction with what Blom-Hansen and Stepputat refer to as the 'institutional practices and techniques of governance' (2001, 14) historically ingrained into the Venezuelan post-colonial state in the form of political and bureaucratic rationalities and practices effectively working against the institutionalization of new models and values of governance.

Che's new man

What I refer to as 'values of governance' above was emically present in Bolivarian political discourse as part of a broader concern with the multiple 'vices' (vicios) that had become historically inculcated into social and political life in the form of selfishness, (moral) corruption, greed, dishonesty and lack of conscientiousness. Consequently, socio-economic transformation and the transformation of social and moral values were discursively and ideologically cast as two sides of the same coin (see also Strønen 2017). Not only was it paramount to change the ethics and ethos of the state apparatus in order to serve the aspirations of the Bolivarian process, but a new society built on a new economic and political order could neither flourish if its people – and state institutions – still held on to the mindset of the old capitalist and bourgeois model. This line of reasoning was present in official as well as popular political discourse. An example can be found in an interview I did in Caracas in 2009 with Eduardo Piñate, who at the time of the writing of this article is the secretary general of the ruling Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). At the time of the interview, he worked in the Libertador Municipal Administration under then-Mayor Jorge Rodríguez. During our conversation revolving around a broad array of topics concerning bottom-up organization, current events and the role of oil in Venezuela, I asked him about the 'sowing the oil' concept, and how it fit with the Bolivarian development model. He talked for a while about how the export-oriented rentier model has suppressed the development of other economic sectors, and then about how Venezuelans' relationship with oil comes to the fore through the cheap price of gasoline. Venezuelans are not aware of the value of oil, he says. He then talks about the need to foment consciousness about these issues:

> The Bolivarian revolution is the only revolution in the world that has raised the issue of building socialism at the same time as they have money at their disposal. If you put yourself to see historically all the socialist revolutions of the Russian revolution, the Cuban revolution, going through the Chinese, no? They found it very difficult because they had no resources; they were the weakest links in the imperialist chain, then, to assume Lenin's theory about the weakest link in the imperialist chain … Venezuela is not like that. Thus, the Bolivarian revolution, because of the very serious social debt that we inherited … it has resolved and has lowered the rates of poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy … it has increased school enrollment, has incorporated people, we are beginning to turn into a sports nation, and so on. But culturally, all this has not yet been reflected in a rupture with bourgeois consciousness or with consumer consciousness, that is why we still have great evils here, right?

Hence, Piñate's words reflects a widespread concern at the time about the parallel struggle between, on the one hand, attending to the country's social debt through social spending,

and on the other hand, creating new moralities and regimes of value that counteracted the bourgeois mindset that had become ingrained into the population – rich and poor – during the capitalist-consumerist paradigm of the late twentieth century. In line with the ideas of Ché Guevara, Piñate, as well as many grassroots activists, viewed the educational system as key to this process. In addition to the educational social missions Robinson (elementary education), Ríbas (high school) and Sucre (university), there was a proliferation of popular assemblies and organizational spaces where ideological debate was frequently part of the agenda. These meeting could be organized as collaboration between state institutions, state-affiliated organizations, popular sector organizations and activists, or it could be only popular activist-driven. Sometimes government- and public representatives led the discussions, but often it was grassroots activists that pushed for ideological debate in a bid to compel state- and government representatives into engaging in discussions about how to propel the Bolivarian process forward. The country's oil dependency was however rarely discussed at the grassroots, lest for amongst more seasoned critical popular intellectuals. Rather, the notions that 'the oil is finally ours' as a result of Chávez' triumph over foreign oil capital and the nation's former oil class, and that the state was using these revenues to develop the country and 'pay its social debt to the poor', constituted an interlinked narrative; one that cast Chávez as the warden of both Venezuela's sovereignty and the country's path to a more propitious future.

The enduring magical state

But how may we interpret this historical and contextual collusion between Chávez' appeal and role, the ethos of 'sowing the oil', of bottom-up social struggle, and of (ostensible) sovereign and nationalist undertakings? Let us now return to Fernando Coronil.

Chávez' charismatic qualities, and the utopian magnitude of the Bolivarian project, made it easy for observers to draw parallels between Coronil's seminal work on the Magical State (published in 1997, the year before Chávez gained power) and Chávez's rule. In his book, Coronil argues that through the possession and imagery of oil, the Venezuelan nation state was composed by two bodies; 'a political body made up of its citizens, and a natural body made up of its rich subsoil' (Coronil 1997, 25). As a mediating agent between the people and the nation's riches, the state manifested itself as a Magical State and the nation's politicians as magicians. Performing on the state's stage, they could throw spectacles incarnating the state's ability to pull social realities, 'from public institutions to cosmogonies, out of a hat' (Coronil 1997, 2).

The concept of the Magical State can easily be deployed in a reductionist manner by interpreting it solely as a political charade by charismatic politicians with oil at their disposal. However, Coronil takes great care in unpacking the deeper origins and dimensions of the Magical State. Theoretically, he weaves together 'theories of underdevelopment, neoclassical views of natural resources, the Marxist theory of value and an analysis of the evolution of oil prices in this century' (1997, 6) as well as modernization and subalternity theories, seeking to 'unsettle the illusion that [Venezuelas] history can be contained within fixed theoretical, temporal, or cultural boundaries' (1997, xi). Through a labyrinthine journey through Venezuela's political economy, political affairs, public scandals and spectacles of power, Coronil sets out to show how the Venezuelan state, both in its material

and symbolic form, was shaped by its location within global hierarchies of power. Within such hierarchies, the Venezuelan state becomes relegated to a subjugated, yet central, position in the global economy, and cast as a fractured mirror reflecting images of modernity emanating from the West. The key underpinning of his work, however, is a critical reading of Marxist analysis of the relationship between land, labour, and the often forgotten part in the equation; land. It is land, as the source and harbourer of natural resources, that is the foundation of the Venezuelan state's magical powers (Coronil 2011, n.p). Because oil (granted by the power of land/nature in the Marxist sense) obscures the sources of wealth of the landlord state (the Venezuelan state), it allows for the state to constitutes itself as a 'sorcerer' that accrues riches as by magic.

In 2000, Coronil wrote; 'is Chávez yet another magician offering only the ephemeral illusion of progress, or is he a leader capable of using his remarkable personal magic to revitalize Venezuela's moribund democracy?' (2000, 41). Coronil came across as increasingly critical and cautious of Chávez' métier to not only conjure up promises of progress out of a hat, as presidents before him, but to actually attempt to conjure up a new version of Venezuela from the hat (Coronil 2011, n.p). At the same time, he also commended Chávez for redeeming those who were formerly cast as Venezuela's 'barbarians'; to open up as space where the nation's poor, *el pueblo*, had both symbolic and political legitimacy as members of the nation (Coronil 2011, n.p). Concurrently, Chávez also exploited existing socio-spatial and economic divisions in Venezuelan society. From a recurrent dichotomizing narration emerged a new category of 'otherness'; those who did not identify with the vision of a new Venezuela born from the refoundation of the Republic based on Bolivarian principles (Coronil 2011, n.p). For Chávez, the Bolivarian revolution was a historical battle to bring the country into modernity, but not a familiar modernity; that associated with the metropolitan centers that had been the hegemonic definition of modernity in all state-building projects in Latin America in the twentieth century (Coronil 2011, n.p). Rather, the aim was to build a new form of modernity, one which excelled the country into sovereignty in the face of an historical imperial world order; born from technological development and economic self-sufficiency, and an autodefined *cultural* modernity based on autochthonous Latin American customs, traditions, histories and socialities. In this scheme, the trope of savagery and barbarism was reversed (Coronil 2011, n.p.). Barbarism in this worldview was represented by the savage neoliberal world order that caused destruction and injustice. Civilization, in contrast, could be achieved through a new political model based on sovereignty and social justice.

Coronil's reading of Venezuela under Chávez reflects his intimate understanding of the nature of the Latin American state and its historical and contemporary constitution in a subordinate relation to the former colonial and imperial centers. This is an understanding of the state that diverges from Eurocentric state models, and which critically dissects global epistemologies that originates from, and perpetuates colonial relationships of power. Coronil never left out of sight Latin-America's subordinate geopolitical positioning as a nodal point for commencing to understand the deep contradictions harping not only Latin American politics, but also social imaginaries and utopian visions. Post-colonial political and economic structures and entanglements have never seized to condition their space of acting as well as their space of dreaming; it shapes *real-politik* and utopia alike.

One utopia in particular has been an ineradicable Latin American political motif since the nineteenth century struggles for independence and up till today: dreams of

independence; of shaking off the imperial burden once and for all. Formal political independence was achieved, but dependency and subordination continued. The popular movements supporting Chávez knew their history and were aware of the magnitude of the neo-colonial architecture they were up against. They were also aware of that the Bolivarian project was fragile and susceptible to both internal and external enemy fire. A recurrent phrase amongst popular sector activists was that the Bolivarian process was a long-term project that would not be concluded in their lifetime, but which hopefully their children could enjoy the fruits of. What this future, encapsulated in the concepts of Bolivarian Revolution or process, and later Socialism for the twenty-first century entailed exactly, was not a central cause of concern. The immediate task at hand was to build the foundations for its birth; epitomized in the core pillars of social justice; of the dismantling of racialized and socio-economic hierarchies, of cultural de-colonialization and sovereign popular subjectivities, and of participative citizenship.

Concluding thoughts: the crisis of futurity

Coronil approached attempts to imagine alternative futures amongst the Latin American left not as naïve illiberal intransigence, but as part of 'a decolonizing processes that challenges the ethnocentrism of Western modernity and opens up spaces for other imaginaries based on different histories, epistemologies, aesthetics, and ethics' (2019a, 130). However, these attempts harboured a 'crisis of political imagination that was rooted in a contradictory geopolitical situation' (Coronil et al. 2019, 5). The root to this crisis, Coronil suggested, was that the hitherto existing developmentalist models, whether capitalist or socialist, had failed to bring about the promised end results of 'universal equality' and 'general well-being'. Concurrently, the Left no longer knew what to desire:

> This 'crisis of futurity', … was marked by a temporal disjuncture between a long-term utopianism fueled by belief in an alternative future and a short-term pragmatism plagued by the sense of an inescapable and ever-extending present. The result … was a constant tension between radical political imaginaries and everyday accommodations with neoliberal economic arrangements. (Coronil et al. 2019, 5)

As nature-exporting states in the Global South, these countries were defined by nominal political independence in par with economic dependence, which effectively left them in a temporal side split between the longitude of societal transformation and the immediate need for capital inflow.

> Under such conditions, any attempts to develop long-term transformative projects are obstructed by the short-term imperative to maximize income and seek comparative advantages in the existing global market place. This means that 'in a perverse twist of fate, in pursuit of fortune, leftist states may be doing the work of capital'. (Coronil et al. 2019, 5)

One can only speculate in to what extent and how exactly Chávez conceptualized this dilemma. However, his apparent – or at least stated – strategy to increase oil production in order to have a financial base for his visions for 'sowing the oil', can be interpreted as an attempt to achieve a nominal sovereign political, social and economic base before the momentum was lost. Time and neo-colonial gravitational power were always critical factors for the Bolivarian process, because the challenges were so deep-seated and interlinked, and the obstacles and adversaries so manifold. As stated in the introduction, the

Bolivarian process harboured multiple sets of demands and ambitions that in many respects were irreconcilable: to amend the legacy of its post-colonial past in the form of social inequality and lacking social and economic development, in parallel with diversifying the economy, accommodating different class-interests, defending and amplifying sovereignty, and transcending the extractivist capitalist iron grip considered as the root cause for the country's ills and challenges. Oil then, and the deep dependence on global capitalism that it implied, represented a geo-political, economic and structural vulnerability to escape, at the same time as it was the country's most important financial, political and symbolic asset.

Evidently, this is not to say that Chávez' strategy was coherent nor successful, or that he didn't also bring into play other rationalities for exaggerating the financial, political and symbolic role of oil under his rule. The way oil was used also needs to be assessed in light of other neo-extractivist/developmentalist governments at the continent at the time, as well as within the broader panorama of policy neglect and policy choices made by the government.

But the point that I want to bring home is that I believe it is highly unsatisfactory to simply point out the hypocrisy of the Chávez-era in maintaining capitalist arrangement whilst trying to concieve an alternative to capitalism. Likewise, it is too easy point out the hypocrisy in speaking out against the damaging global effects of oil extraction, at the same time as Venezuela continued to be an oil country *per excellence*. As I have attempted to demonstrate in this article, and as Coronil alludes to above, both utopias and *real politik* in Venezuela must be fathomed in light of their historical, structural and imaginary conditions and contradictions. That is not to free political leaders from personal responsibility, but to firmly recognize that the conception and course of the Bolivarian process were shaped in convergence with a host of antecedents and synchronic forces; so was its demise.

As we now know, the Bolivarian process eventually evolved into a perfect storm which is difficult to predict the end of. There is no room to extend the analysis pursued here into the current epoch in Venezuela. Suffice to say that the Maduro-government has strayed far from the vision that the Bolivarian process initially harboured, and that even though he has faced many of the same entrenched dilemmas and contradictions that Chávez was facing, many, if not most, at the grassroots would say those now ruling in the name of Bolivarianism have betrayed not only Chávez' legacy, but also *el pueblo*. At the same time, the unfolding of the crisis in Venezuela over the past years has also made the convergence between ideological, financial and geo-political power eagerly seeking to bring the country back into the obedient orbit of Western dominion conspicuously evident. It is a historical tragedy whose prize is first and foremost paid by the most vulnerable members of society. But for those who experienced the 'golden' years of the Bolivarian process from the inside before the problems started to mount, the revolution started to eat its own cadres, and the incongruencies became too evident, this moment in history represented a unprecedented window of opportunity and a moment of hope. And at some point in the future, new political shifts, harbouring the potential for crafting new and potent utopian projects, will take form. Dreams of a different future other than that of liberal global capitalism are not anomalies in Latin America; they are intrinsic of the continent's foundation and evolvement in the faultlines between power and subalternity, localities and globalites, dreams of modernity and dreams of autochthonous sovereignty.

Lest we properly understand that, we are not able to capture the intertwined and contradictory structural and epistemological foundations that inevitably face any process of change.

I believe that it is pertinent to let Coronil have the final say in this text. His summary of the first oil-induced époque of *Gran Venezuela* in the 1970s under the first government of Carlos Andrés Pérez, could in an unsettling way have been written about the Chávez-era. These words thus remind us of that the key challenge haunting Venezuela remains to be solved; how to engineer the pursuit towards sovereignty in defiance of her colonial conception.

> What began in in 1974, however illusory, as a moment of empowerment – of belief in the domestic capacity to modernize the nation – ended in a heightened simulacrum of power – the pretense of sovereign control in the face of uncontrollable domestic and international events and forces. (Coronil 1997, 285)

Notes

1. Hugo Chávez (1954–2013), president of Venezuela from 1998–2013, died from an unspecified form of abdominal cancer on March 5, 2013.
2. Betancourt's quote is taken from Davenport and Cook's 1927 book 'The Oil Trust and the Anglo-American Relations'.
3. I refer to 2017 because since august 2017 the Venezuelan economy has deliberately been forced further down on its knees by US sanctions targeted at the Venezuelan economy and oil sector. This has significantly deepened the pre-existing economic crisis.
4. Here I am particularly thinking of the constant game of chess with a disloyal opposition, the rebuttals of external attempts to undermine the government, recurrent electoral mobilizations, and the entangled effects of sixty years of rural abandonment, fast-paced urbanization, social marginalization, and socio-spatial segregation.
5. Approximately 90 percent of the population lives in urban areas (Tinker Salas 2015, 217), predominantly along the coastline.

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