

Review: Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money and Modernity in Venezuela* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

Paula Hevia

Up until the late 1980s, political analysts commonly referred to Venezuela, as South America's most stable and long-lasting democratic regime. With the economic crisis of the late 1980s and 1990s, as well as with the collapse of the country's bi-party system that followed, observers came to realise that Venezuela's democracy rested on very tenuous foundations. In *The Magical State*, Fernando Coronil revisits the process under which a relatively poor agrarian Latin American country became, due to the expansion of the oil industry, the site of rapid wealth accumulation. In this process, the Venezuelan state and its leaders, gifted with the 'magical power' to rebuild a nation affected by decades of military rule and political instability, were abruptly transformed into 'agents of progress' and 'modernity,' while becoming subjects of a collective mystification. The book is, therefore, about the rise and fall of the Venezuelan petro-state and the 'Venezuelan dream' that came along with it, spanning the dictatorship of General Juan Vicente Gomez (1908-1935) to the beginning of the second Presidency of Rafael Caldera (1994-1998). In his account of the country's political and economic transformations, Coronil seeks to uncover Venezuelan reality by digging, here and there, into various types of work such as plays, poetry and philosophy, which adds an interesting twist to his analysis. Thus, in light of recent events in Venezuela, Coronil's book is a timely resource on this country's politics in particular and Latin American reality in general.

The Magical State is divided into four parts. In the first part of the book, Coronil theorises the relations between nature, nation building and the state by drawing insights from state theory, subaltern studies, dependency perspectives, critical geography, gender analysis and Marxian historical materialism (chapters 1 and 2). In the second part, the author presents his own reformulation of Marx's value theory and notion of fetishism to explain the processes under which the Venezuelan state acquired its 'magical nature' (chapters 3, 4 and 5). Coronil dedicates the third part to three case studies, through which he provides a detailed account of intra-class struggles within the Venezuelan State (chapters 6, 7 and 8). The fourth part offers the author's interpretation of the collapse of the Venezuelan petro-state in the 1990s which culminated in the dismantling of the political system and the discrediting of the country's two major political parties –

Acción Democrática (AD) and the *Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente* (COPEI) (chapter 9). Coronil then concludes with his thoughts on the subaltern nature of the Venezuelan state and the specificity of its modernity (chapter 10).

The Magical State makes various original contributions to the fields of political science, anthropology, history and Latin American studies, but the author's understanding of capitalism is worthy of particular mention. Drawing from Marx's value theory and Lefebvre's work on space and nature,¹ Coronil considers the insertion of nature as crucial for conceptualising capitalist accumulation in the 'Third World.' This inclusion contributes to shift the focus of capital/labour relations, so central in Marxism, to a broader comprehension of commodification processes. By stressing the dialectical interplay prevailing between capital, labour and nature in the economic development of Venezuela, the author aims to highlight the participation of a variety of national and international actors in processes of capitalist accumulation. This *triadic dialectic* is central in Coronil's conception of capitalism in general and 'North/South' relations in particular. On the one hand, it allows him to assess land as an active and significant economic force and, on the other hand, to criticise Eurocentric interpretations of the historical development of capitalism, which neglect this dimension.

In this respect, Coronil's critique of widely accepted Eurocentric conceptions of capitalism, which present modernity and capitalism as western phenomena, is one of the most important theoretical contributions of the book. Theoretically Coronil's critique is based upon a reformulation of Edward Said's notion of 'orientalism' and historically, on the argument that the 'Third World' in general and Latin American countries in particular, were constitutive participants of western capitalism and modernity.² In this regard, Coronil rejects Eurocentric understandings of 'the West and its Others' reproduced through most traditional Western theory. Rather, Coronil emphasises that capitalism has been a global phenomenon from its inception and should be theorised as such. However, while the overall argument is compelling, the author leaves some readers' expectations unfulfilled by failing to provide the historical evidence to illustrate the importance of Latin America, and its interaction with Europe, in the emergence of capitalism.

Inspired by the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty, Coronil also argues that by acknowledging the heterogeneous character of social actors

¹ Henri Lefebvre, *La production de l'espace* (Paris: Anthropos, 1974).

² Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

that share a common condition of subordination, one can better assess power in its various fetishized forms.³ Here the author's definition of 'subalternity' challenges the notion put forward by people like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.⁴ For Coronil, 'subalternity' is a relational category rather than one that is fixed. Hence, one is not 'subaltern' due to one's structural position, but rather due to one's subordinated relation to a more powerful subject (see Coronil 1994).⁵ Following this rationale, the author argues that the Venezuelan state can simultaneously be perceived as dominant in its relation to its citizens, but as subaltern in relation to central capitalist states and international institutions. As Coronil emphasises, this approach to 'subalternity' seeks to render dominant/subordinate relations less essentialist while stressing the always-changing characteristics of social subjects. Nevertheless, this conceptualisation also rids the term of its original signification of expressing the experiences of marginalized subjects in society. The tension, therefore, emerges from Coronil's adoption of the term 'subaltern' to illustrate Venezuelan state's subordination to more powerful international actors.

While Coronil aims to contribute to the above theoretical debates, his main concern remains the Venezuelan State and its foundational discourses. In this respect, the author traces the means through which the Venezuelan State acquired its 'magical' attributes. He first illustrates how state discourses propelled by its distributive capacity of oil money allowed charismatic presidents to construct a powerful nationalist imaginary which contributed to the reification of the Venezuelan state unlike any other in the region. Citizens fetishized oil and glorified populist leaders, which were converted into national icons, intensifying a culture of miracles and progress. These collective representations of oil power and political leaders are central to Coronil's explanation of the magical and unique nature of the Venezuelan state.

Although, given his emphasis on subaltern studies, it is unfortunate that his analysis gives little attention to how state discourses and propagandistic strategies were differently perceived and processed by various sectors of society. Instead, Coronil offers a

rather bipolar state/society account of the ideological processes at stake. This apparent oversight is rectified by a complex account of the inner logic of intra-class relations of the Venezuelan state, which Coronil convincingly reconstructs through interviews, popular gossip and journalistic information. In this regard, Coronil's analysis of three case studies – the auto industry, the tractor industry, and the *Carmona case* (a political assassination in the late 1970s) – demonstrates how oil money undermined productive development initiatives. This, in turn, spread financial speculation and corruption in Venezuela, while concentrating decision-making power in the highest levels of government.

In more general terms, this book reaches beyond disciplinary boundaries. The historical data, the political intrigues of Venezuelan elites and the dynamic accounts of intra-class relations in Coronil's *Magical State* are extremely insightful and rich. By revealing fragments of a reality to which access is generally limited to insiders close to the Venezuelan political elite, Coronil makes an important contribution to our understanding of Venezuela. Moreover, his work reflects the need to critically assess the specificity of national historical paths in relation to broader processes of international accumulation and development. Hence, readers will appreciate the author's daring attempt to explore theoretical avenues that challenge, in constructive ways, conventional political analysis of Latin American reality. Not surprisingly, *The Magical State* has become a unique reference for Latin Americanists and deserves the attention of those interested in critical approaches to state theory, geography, political economy and subaltern studies.

³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?" *Representations* 37 (Winter 1992): 1-26.

⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

⁵ Fernando Coronil, 1994. "Listening to the Subaltern: The Poetics of Neocolonial States." *Poetics Today*. 15:4 (1994), p. 642-58.