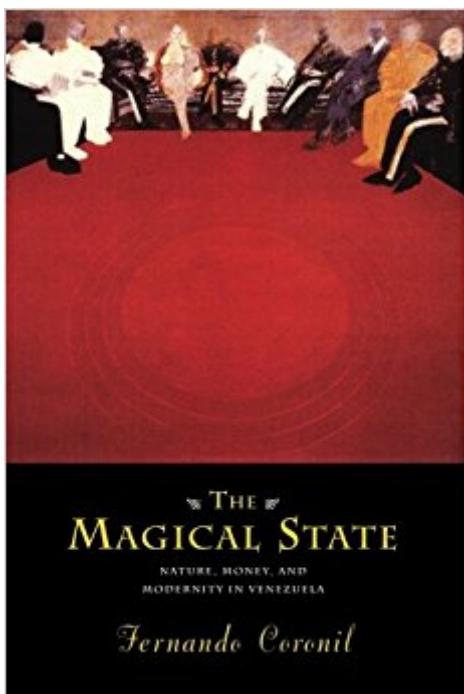


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The Magical State: Nature, Money, And Modernity In Venezuela



Synopsis

In 1935, after the death of dictator General Juan Vicente Gómez, Venezuela consolidated its position as the world's major oil exporter and began to establish what today is South America's longest-lasting democratic regime. Endowed with the power of state oil wealth, successive presidents appeared as transcendent figures who could magically transform Venezuela into a modern nation. During the 1974-78 oil boom, dazzling development projects promised finally to effect this transformation. Yet now the state must struggle to appease its foreign creditors, counter a declining economy, and contain a discontented citizenry. In critical dialogue with contemporary social theory, Fernando Coronil examines key transformations in Venezuela's polity, culture, and economy, recasting theories of development and highlighting the relevance of these processes for other postcolonial nations. The result is a timely and compelling historical ethnography of political power at the cutting edge of interdisciplinary reflections on modernity and the state.

Book Information

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an interesting insight into why oil rent cannot buy industrial development. In addition to historical overview, Coronil describes the simultaneously enabling and corrosive effect of oil rent via several focused examples such as the failure to establish a Venezuelan tractor industry. These examples are especially convincing because of the interview material used to round out the characters of the main actors. On the other hand, the effort to connect the development difficulties of Venezuela with the general theory of rent capture is uninspired.

I bought this book in order to get some context for the situation today with Chavez. However, the author seems to get lost in his own head and for large parts of the book fails to describe anything other than a load of overly sophisticated academic speak that nobody understands. While there are a few excellent chapters in it I felt a bit let down.

En Español: Puede que la información sea demasiado profunda, pero sin duda es pertinente y esclarecedora. Pero lo más importante es que su lectura provoca una imaginación teatral, cinematográfica y literaria de los acontecimientos que hicieron posible la Venezuela antes de Chávez y que, por lo tanto, explican al actual proceso político para bien y para mal y sin las contaminaciones de la polarización actual, que tanto daño le han hecho al pensamiento social venezolano y latinoamericano. El Estado Mágico de Coronil va dejando la antropología para sumergirnos en un cruce pasmoso de las novelas negras que fueron coincidiendo en la identidad venezolana del petróleo. In English: It is possible that the theoretical information is not so deep as we would like, but there is no doubt that it is pertinent and clarifying. But the most important, its lecture provokes a theatrical, cinematographical and literary imagination of the events that made pre-Chavez' Venezuela possible. And for so on, those events also explain the political process now a day (for the good and for the bad) without the pollution from actual polarisation which have been so harmful to the Venezuelan and latinamerican social thinking. The Coronil's Magical State leave gradually anthropology theories in order to plunge us in a frightening black novels crossroad where the oil-venezuelan identity match up. Daniel Castro Aniyar Sociologist and Anthropologist

VENEZUELA INDEPENDIENTE, 1810-1960. Mariano Picón-Salas et al

In his introduction to *The Magical State*, Coronil writes: "As an oil nation, Venezuela was seen as having two bodies, a political body made up of its citizens and a natural body made up of its rich subsoil." Coronil's subject is how the state interacted with these two bodies. Abundant oil money, he argues, raised the ambitions of the state and the expectations of the people to an unrealistic extreme. Although excessive cashflow could not be spent efficiently in an underdeveloped country like Venezuela, pretending to do so was the government's sole claim to legitimacy; thus a charade of progress and benevolence pervaded the political culture of an export-driven, dependent economy. Coronil's ideas are fascinating, and Part I alone (of four) makes this book worth reading. Unfortunately, Coronil does not bring his ideas home persuasively. Instead his book slowly degenerates into deconstructed historical anecdotes and glimpses of bitter subjectivity: reminders of

his own experience with the government of Venezuela. Coronil's book casts an intriguing theoretical perspective on more conventional, more competent histories of Venezuela by scholars like Judith Ewell or John Lombardi. Read them first. The Magical State is for those who are comfortable with the historical framework and are ready to read critically--caveat lector.

This book goes far, very far, beyond the pedestrian and misleading analyses of Judith Ewell or John Lombardi. Coronil offers a history of Venezuela that reveals connections among state-formation, national mythology, natural resource exploitation, and class rule. A must read, therefore, not only for all Latin Americanists but also many others.

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