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Rowan Lubbock 

Queen Mary, University of London

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Rowan Lubbock¹

***Book Review: Mariya P. Ivancheva,
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Among the pantheon of left-wing Latin American governments that swept the continent in the early 21st century, arguably the most radical, most beguiling, most contradictory, and most tragic, is the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela. Given its unique (though not necessarily ‘special’) place within this political conjuncture, no shortage of ink has been spilled on the deep-seated transformations carried out in the name of the Venezuelan people, as well as the domestic and international conflicts that followed in their wake (see, most recently, Marino 2018; Samet 2019; Cooper 2019; Wilde 2023; Lubbock 2024). Among the many themes examined by scholars, activists and other observers is the role of higher education reform within the Bolivarian Republic, and the ways in which Hugo Chávez Frias, the charismatic leader of the ‘Bolivarian turn’, sought to build a new society by cultivating new knowledge among the people.

When I first arrived in Venezuela for my fieldwork in 2015, my friend turned my attention to a man on a street corner tending to a small table stacked with tiny red books given out for free. Picking up a copy of this thimble-sized text, my friend handed it to me, saying, ‘this is the new Bolivarian constitution.’ I asked why copies of this text had to be so small; the answer was straightforward: ‘so that every citizen can carry a copy with them, that if they are taken advantage of, or

¹ Rowan Lubbock is Senior Lecturer in Political Economy of Development, at Queen Mary University of London. After receiving his PhD in International Relations from Birkbeck, University of London in 2017, he joined the School of Politics and International Relations at Queen Mary in 2019. Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1517-130X>.

exploited, they can simply turn to the constitution to show their rights and protections under the law.’

This move on behalf of the new Bolivarian government was more than simply a stunt; it was a fundamental component in the broader strategy to create an *estado comunal* (communal state). Speaking to the Argentinian intellectual, Marta Harnecker, Chávez noted that, ‘As soon as we started our government, we set the course, the entire pedagogical, educational, participatory process in which the grand majority of the people comes to view the constitution as their constitution... I continue to insist that people read it, discuss it, analyse it, interpret it, love it’ (Chávez; cited in Harnecker 2005: 106).

These words reveal the fundamentally pedagogical character of not just the Bolivarian revolution, but revolution in general. In Mariya Ivancheva’s *The Alternative University: Lessons from Bolivarian Venezuela*, we encounter the kinetic, contradictory and counter-intuitive life-cycle of higher education reform across the terrain of socio-political struggle during the Bolivarian turn. Ivancheva weaves a beautiful story told from below, among ordinary Venezuelans from a variety of social and educational backgrounds, all attempting to steer higher education into the service of the people, or the ‘logic of social relevance’, as she puts it (p. 84). The style of writing is also, in the best tradition of anthropological work, presented as a story, a narrative, rather than a staid analytical exposition. It is, of course, peppered with in-depth conceptual framings – from Bourdieu’s notion of intellectual and cultural capital to social reproduction theory. Yet reading the book feels more like diving into a political drama, strewn with different characters, scenes, set pieces and plot twists.

The book begins with a reflection on the contested public terrain of the capital city, Caracas. Opening with the 2009 referendum campaign for rescinding the limits on presidential re-election, we begin with the central protagonist of the book, the Universidad Bolivariana de Venezuela (UBV) (the ‘alternative university’), and its campus in Los Chaguaramos neighbourhood, which became a key site of organisation for the *caravanas de alegría* (caravans of happiness) during the referendum campaign. One of the interesting aspects of this campaign was the extensive use of graffiti on public buildings and infrastructure by Chavez supporters within the caravan. As Ivancheva points out, this was a rather counter-intuitive strategy, given that this was, in effect, a political campaign paid for by public money to paint graffiti on public property. But the rationale for this kind of strategy is telling. One character from the book, Manuel, an arts faculty member

at UBV, provides insight as to why the pro-Chávez campaign would make such extensive use of graffiti on the built environment:

‘You say that the graffiti painted on the walls during caravans, and posters and flags are excessive. But have you ever thought of starting to count how many commercials there are for each one of them? We are not fighting just the opposition. We are fighting a bigger battle against capitalism, in which every commercial post or billboard is part of their campaign against us’ (p. 33)

This sentiment powerfully articulates what Ivancheva describes as the ideological/discursive articulation of a political movement beset by an always-immanent ‘threat’ from ‘mighty enemy figures such as global capitalism, empire, and Venezuelan oligarchy’. The result is the cultivation of ‘not a state effect, but a state affect’ (p. 27). This latter phrase refers to ‘an assemblage of needs and hopes, desires and expectations that imply obligation on the part of the state to its constituents’ (Krupa and Nugent 2015: 14; cf. Coronil 1997). Thus, the (affective) Bolivarian state partially ties its constituents to a project of hope grounded in the fundamental desire to redress historical injustices.

As she further argues, this revolutionary paraphernalia – from hats and t-shirts to urban graffiti – turns on its head the late James Scott’s (1998) notion of making populations visible as a core component of modern statecraft. With the Bolivarian project, in contrast, everyday objects and aesthetics ‘made the state legible to the population’ (p. 33). Yet this strategy was less a powerful transformative tool than it was a function of a state/society complex fissured by a type of dual power – unable to fundamentally confront and overturn bourgeois institutions and power structures, and instead opting to carve out autonomous spaces of experimentation and reform (p. 43).

Chapter 2 charts the history of Bolivarian higher education reform through two distinct lenses. Firstly, the notion of ‘academic autonomy’, a term used by the Venezuelan left during the 1958-89 period of liberal democracy, was used to reimagine radical pedagogy as a social good, as well as resist political violence on public university campuses. However, this tendency was subverted by subsequent liberal governments, and later weaponised by the opponents of the left to prevent

progressive reforms on traditional universities (pp. 52-3). In this way, the notion of academic autonomy became an ideological analogue to the bourgeois liberal notion of individual autonomy, as the central index for valorising market society. From this point on, Venezuela's higher education system fissured between private 'autonomous' universities and 'experimental' universities overseen by the state directly (p. 57). As the neoliberal era wore on, autonomous universities would increasingly feel the pinch of 'global competitiveness', with regulatory bodies evaluating the performance of faculty and institution alike.

The second lens of the chapter focuses on the María Eglida Castellano, vice-minister for academic policy in the new Ministry of Higher Education within the Chávez government and creator of the UBV. Among Castellano's vision for a new educational policy was to decentralise the institutional structure, expand facilities to remote areas, and a Law of Communal Service that required students to work within communities. But this vision was not universally accepted. Others within UBV favoured centralised planning promoted by government figures. The alternative university also faced a number of challenges – its lack of accreditation among the country's oversight bodies – the Office for Planning and Budgeting of the University Sector (OPSU) and National University Council (CNU) – forced UBV students to retake their undergraduate degrees elsewhere in order to be eligible for postgraduate work. Meanwhile, UBV graduates could not find adequate employment, with major firms – including the state oil company, PDVSA – turning their backs on hopeful applicants (p. 68). The result was the further fission of the Bolivarian higher educational structure, with the introduction of the Alma Mater programme as a means of getting around the lack of accreditation. With the formation of a large number of small technical colleges all geared towards a globally competitive 'knowledge economy', Alma Mater was now pitted against the less well-endowed network centred on UBV.

Chapter 3 zooms in on the internal differentiation of faculty privilege and power within the alternative university. Opening with a powerful anecdote from a *mesa de trabajo* (working group) session at UBV, Ivancehva shines a light on the contested place of theory and knowledge production within the ranks of the UBV. With participants split over the place of esoteric theory and the practical necessity of reaching ordinary people, the tense discussion among participants in the working group revealed the underlying hierarchies dividing the established (mostly male) academics with social and cultural capital – a 'radical nobility', as Bourdieu puts it (p. 81) – and more junior students/academics with closer proximity and access to poor communities, themselves carrying a distinct type of

symbolic capital tied to the project of *el estado comunal*. In the end, the alternative university had to negotiate to legacies of the old system: an internal class hierarchy dominated by ‘male revolutionary charisma and its canon of theory and conduct’, and the prevailing ‘rules’ shaping evaluation and employability set down by Western academic institutions, including those related to ‘world ranking and citation systems’ (p. 105).

Chapter 4 brings the reader deep into the barrios, where arguably the most radical component of the alternative university is on display. The opening sections chart the myriad challenges faced by UBV graduates as they attempt to enter the job market. Bringing to the foreground again the dual power structure of the Bolivarian turn, private employers, and even the UBV itself (!), turned their back on UBV diplomas, making them essentially worthless for post-university life. To make matters worse, many of the (male, charismatic) faculty at UBV looked down upon students seeking to gain some modicum of economic security in the private sector, as if such a move betrays their ‘revolutionary’ education. For those unable to crack into an already-tight job market, micro-credit schemes from the state were seen as a last-ditch option, yet notoriously difficult to obtain (as discussed below). As one interlocutor so poignantly recalls: ‘one of the weaknesses of the system is that we first created UBV, and then started to think about student employment’ (p. 124).

The larger case study of the chapter revolves around *proyecto* outreach initiatives among students within their local communities. Rather than dissect the specific pedagogical activities among these *proyecto* participants, Ivancheva offers a deep dive into the gendered divisions of labour within the Bolivarian turn. Drawing on the work of Samuel Hurtado (1998), she introduces the concept of ‘matrissociality’, which speaks to the ‘the mother-centred socialities in poor families with no property, where women brought up their children together and were the sole breadwinners in families’ (p 130). Thus the (affective?) foundation of the revolution is ultimately built upon the ‘surplus extraction’ of female labour, acting both as caregiver and revolutionary vanguard.

The final substantive chapter reflects on the problematic relationship between left solidarity and the (im)possibility of left-wing critique of its own project. Through one example, Ivancheva charts the fraught relationship between radical students and a more hesitant faculty, the latter hoping their students to become the next revolutionary cadre, yet ultimately critical of those very same students raising

their voice and organising for better conditions at UBV. Facing accusations of ‘infiltrators’ and ‘counter-revolutionary’ (p. 148), student demands were ultimately deflected by the university and the Ministry of Education. A parallel story concerning the attempt at critical self-reflection among a network of left intellectuals within the Centro Internacional Miranda (CIM) echoes this tragic twist of fate, as sympathetic critics of the Bolivarian turn were confronted by a hostile political class seeking to discredit such critiques as led by ‘infiltrated bourgeois’ individuals, or even shut down by state officials (pp. 154-155). Thus, the (im)possibility of critique was always cast in the light of aiding ‘the enemy’, even in a moment of dire need for self-reflection and rectification of a revolutionary process gone awry.

The rich layers and expansive cast of characters across *The Alternative University* makes for an intensely enjoyable read. But it also sometimes creates challenges in keeping hold of the central thread of the argument. There is often a sudden switch in gear (albeit very much in keeping with the rhythms of revolutionary transformation), and connections between themes and stories not always readily apparent. In the remainder of this essay, I offer a number of observations and questions that remain lingering across the text.

On the (In)Visibility of the Bolivarian State

One thing that seemed to be all-pervading within the book, yet somehow always in the shadows, was the state itself. Or rather, the state is ‘constantly but unobtrusively present’ (p. 130). We don’t hear much about ministry officials, or struggles across the judicial branches of the state apparatus, or even the top-down policy making prevalent across the Chávez era. Rather, Ivancheva paints a different picture of a state that grounds its power through the cultivation of affective bonds at the grassroots level. As noted above (chapter 1), this reflects the ways in which ‘democratic institutions merged with affective kindred structures’ (p. 130). Ivancheva brings this state/society complex into contrast with more ‘classical’ cases exemplified by Scott’s *Seeing like a State* (1998). Bolivarian Venezuela, as argued in the book, does not work through the mechanics of high modernism, but through the meandering pathways of communal politics, at the level of the neighbourhood rather than the control centre. But I wonder to what extent the Bolivarian state comes far closer to the features outlined by Scott in his critique of high modernism. Consider some of the other parallels with traditional forms of state power, particularly the project of the

2007/8 land survey carried out by the Ministry of Agriculture (Lubbock 2024: 109-11) – somewhat reminiscent of cadastral mapping (Scott 1998: 36) – or the scientific project of genetic selection among cattle breeding projects (Kappeler 2023). In both cases, practices of making territory and nature legible, measurable and governable sharply converge with *modus operandi* of the ‘modern state’ (Branch 2013; Li 2007; Adas 1989), even if the *estado comunal* encompassed a more complex ensemble of participatory spaces and practices among a variety of actors (Lubbock 2024).

To use an example closer to the book’s topic, the construction of the aldeas, as a form of decentralised higher education, did not faithfully follow the Cuban model of municipal universities managed independently. Rather, the aldeas created a sprawling web of new parallel institutions which were all centrally managed at the ministerial level. This then begs the question to what extent did the Bolivarian state not draw upon its own ‘totalistic ideologies, overseeing and omnipotent plans?’ (p. 44).

On a related yet somewhat separate note, I was struck by the problem of post-university employment (Chapter 4), and the frequency with which micro-finance bids were unsuccessful due to the heavily bureaucratic and technocratic language used within these application processes. In one sense, students struggle to win funding because they simply do not speak the language of the state. Here I’m reminded of Nicos Poulantzas’ analysis the capitalist state, and the manner in which the division between manual and intellectual labour is not just present within sites of capitalist production, but principally condensed within the state apparatus itself: ‘not anyone can talk the language of the state, and nor can it come from just anywhere. There is indeed a secrecy of power and bureaucracy – a secrecy, however, which is not the same as a one-way role of silence’ (Poulantzas 2014: 32). Rather than simply dismiss the affective power of small objects and symbols as a central infrastructural asset of the Bolivarian turn, it seems as if this novel form of statecraft was equally inflected with more traditional modalities of (bourgeois) state power, thus bringing to the foreground yet again the perennial challenge of dismantling the master’s house by using the master’s tools (cf. p. 81).

Knowledge production and the practicality of (social) science

How can the general intellect of capitalist society be used in the service of building a post-capitalist one? This was a question that kept coming back to me as I read about the unanticipated obstacles and setbacks faced by the alternative university. What the UBV desperately required, in order to educate the people, was a ready and available cadre of trained academics willing to carry forward the values of *chavismo* as a genuinely popular project. But without access to the pool of already trained academics – most of them in traditional universities and resoundingly hostile to the government – UBV had to suddenly train new academics from scratch. This strategic bottle-neck haunted the Bolivarian process from the beginning, whether in the example of replacing antagonistic engineers and technicians within the national oil company PDVSA (Ellner 2008), or in the case of training new agricultural cooperatives (Page 2010). The problem of finding, and tapping into, a ready-made pool of knowledge and skill for the purpose of engineering a completely novel form of society was one that constantly eluded the Bolivarian state.

Moreover, the question of how the Bolivarian states squares the circle of producing employable graduates capable of integrating themselves into the labour market on the one hand, and shaping a new pedagogical paradigm that is, at the very least, anti-neoliberal and, at most, anti-capitalist. This challenge speaks not just to the Bolivarian revolution, but to progressive left projects in general. Though some attempted to sweep away capitalist social property relations entirely, as in Cuba, this was more the exception than the rule. And while radical pedagogy may be seen as a bulwark against the notion of ‘[e]ducation... as a consumable commodity that enables individuals to become ideal liberal democratic citizens... both as a worker and consumer’ (Motta 2014: 176), the fact remains that the material conditions of reproduction often require the inculcation of the worker/consumer mentality. In other words, the problem of market dependence looms large for any radical left project that does not attempt to transform the relations of production at its root. From this perspective, it would have been useful to understand whether, and to what extent, UBV graduates were able to transition from the alternative university to the alternative economy (*economía social*) – beyond the examples of communal cooperatives (themselves an important part of this social fabric), including *Empresas de Producción Social* (Social Production Companies): mixed enterprises or worker/state-run firms (Azzellini 2016; cf. Larrabure 2013). Though somewhat beyond the purview of the book, even a casual focus on how and to what degree UBV graduates, beyond

the problems faced by those seeking credit or loans from state development banks, may have found alternate pathways into social(ist) enterprises would have been most welcome.

But beyond the problem of finding the requisite faculty or even employment opportunities, questions arise as to exactly what kind of education would be adequate to a socialist project. Recalling the anecdote above (chapter 3) on the *mesa de trabajo*, Ivancheva invites us to reflect on precisely what kinds of practical value social science might bring to the project of re-orienting society towards emancipatory horizons. As one Argentinian student, Ricarda, tells us: ‘faculty members... are overburdened with work, double-employed, and often badly prepared. They funnel theory down our heads but give us little practically applicable knowledge.’ (141-2). Ivancheva thus shines much needed light on the tensions bound up with the politics of popular education – whether to be ensnared by high-intellectual discourse, or grounded in the everyday lives of the people, which contain its own forms of knowledge as reservoirs of popular wisdom. How does one strike the balance between critical philosophical methods, and more concrete forms of pedagogy that are able to both speak the language of the people while at the same time transcending it through a *diálogo de saberes* (dialogue of knowledges)? Though a seemingly impossible question to answer in its totality, this problematic was also left suspended in mid-air, leaving the reader in blissful suspense as to what new type of revolutionary ‘common sense’ might be adequate to the particularities of the Bolivarian turn.

Feminising the revolution, or how the Bolivarian state became a gran patron

While chapter 4 offers a potential sandpit for teasing out some of the challenges of building a genuinely popular form of emancipatory knowledge-production, the question of gendered visions of labour seems to take centre stage, offering a window into the contradictions of popular education and organising in Bolivarian Venezuela. As other scholars on contemporary Venezuela have pointed out (e.g. Espina and Rakowski 2010; Elfenbein 2019; Torres 2022), the Bolivarian process embodies a specific gendered division of labour between male employment in the formal economy, and female community organising. Notwithstanding the expansion of women’s employment during the Chávez era, the valorisation of popular participation and grassroots agency – in the form of communal councils

and higher-level communes (*comunas*) – it is ultimately realised through the unpaid labour of women from which infrastructures of *el estado comunal* emerge.

Though the concept of ‘matrisociality’ offers a unique lens through which to interpret women’s autonomous organisation and self-empowerment, a strange elision occurs with the concept of patriarchy itself. If one of the classical mechanisms of patriarchy refers to a situation in which the unpaid labour of women forms a fundamental component of the reproduction of male labour-power, then what happens to this concept in the absence of said male figure? One answer is alluded to with the notion of ‘political surplus extraction’ (p. 114), or rather, the extraction of surplus female labour that feeds the communal infrastructures of the Venezuelan state in the form of community organising. But perhaps then it is the state itself that steps in as benevolent breadwinner – the gran patron holding the property of the nation, the source of monetary wealth, and the centre of power building its foundation upon the un-remunerated labour of women. In this sense, the Bolivarian state appears as a patriarchal state writ large, one that is ‘exploiting and solidifying the institution of matrisociality’ (p.132). In light of these contradictory lines of force permeating the Bolivarian state, the book could have delved a bit deeper into these hidden forms of exploitation within a genuinely affective and solidaristic political project.

The Alternative University will be essential reading for experts of contemporary Venezuelan politics, as well as more casual readers seeking to get to grips with Venezuela’s radical past and contradictory present. In light of a long-standing economic crisis – both internally and externally generated (cf. Sutherland 2016; Koerner 2022) – the state itself has transmuted into a type of ‘authoritarian statism’ (Poulantzas, 2014). The dissolution in 2017 of the National Assembly in favour of a National Constituent Assembly effectively signalled the consolidation of Maduro’s power over the key branches of the state apparatus. Rather than fulfilling the peoples’ wishes, the ANC provided a short-circuit around the organic crisis afflicting the state since at least 2016 (cf. Aporrea 2017). The result has been the steady expulsion of progressive left forces from the ruling Partido Socialista de Venezuela (PSUV), from barring commune leaders like Angel Prado from a Mayoral race in 2017, to the wider tendency of unilaterally replacing leadership cadres in dissident left parties (Boothroyd 2017; Granados Ceja 2023). The most recent presidential election results remain mired in controversy over electoral

irregularities², with an uncertain future for progressive left forces in the country. The (im)possibility of critique – as seen across The Alternative University – has thus haunted the Bolivarian project from its earliest days, culminating into a paroxysm of repression across the entire strategic terrain of the state. Told from a unique perspective, Ivancheva shines a new light on a story of emancipatory promise and dashed hopes, prompting deeper considerations on what the role higher education might have for progressive political projects within and beyond Latin America.

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² See Carter Centre Statement on Venezuelan Elections, <https://www.cartercenter.org/news/pr/2024/venezuela-073024.html>

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