

State & Power in Bolivarian Venezuela. Review of *State and Power after Neoliberalism in Bolivarian Venezuela*, by Donald V. Kingsbury. [Dissertation Reviews](#) [April 21, 2014]

Contemporary Venezuelan politics have been the center of world attention for their role in the so-called reemergence of populism and debilitation of neoliberalism in Latin America, as well as for their oppositional role in the international arena. Much of the attention paid to Venezuelan politics, however, has concentrated on the figure of former president Hugo Chávez and the influence of his leadership. There is little doubt that the dominant political discourse in Venezuela since the late eighties has aggressively recast the figure and legacy of early nineteenth century independence leader Simón Bolívar further complicating the not so discrete display of parallelisms between Chávez and Bolívar. Chávez's recent passing has somehow fortified these assumptions and even prolonged this narrow frame of analysis. Donald V. Kingsbury's dissertation challenges these assumptions and proposes a shift in our understanding of Venezuelan politics by focusing on both the history and theory of the relation between mass politics and state formation. Kingsbury's dissertation is an alternative map to the facile reductionism and many times naturalized assumptions about personalism and the figure of the political leader in general. The dissertation invites us to reconsider this equation by offering a sophisticated exposition of how this image fundamentally misplaced the role of mass politics in the constitution of statehood in the wake of rampant neoliberalism in the region.

Kingsbury's dissertation has at least two levels of intervention. The first is a theoretical discussion and exposition of a series of conceptual terms: constituent and constituted power, populism, state, neoliberalism, people, multitude, leader, hegemony and post-hegemony feature most prominently. In this territory the dissertation present itself as a work of reflection and critique of the uses and misuses of this battery of terms and how a certain way of reading these notions is more appropriate to think and describe the Venezuelan conjuncture. At this level, Kingsbury's dissertation is a polemic with two specific frameworks of analysis: Ernesto Laclau's theory of hegemony and populism and Antonio Negri's notion of the multitude and constituent and constituted power. Kingsbury's dissertation is an exposition of the conceptual limitations of these frameworks with a specific political, historical and theoretical situation as a background: economic and political transformations in Venezuela since the late nineteenth-eighties. The dissertation's second level of intervention has to do with how social forces, or constituent power as Kingsbury elaborates, had radically shifted the rigid liberal schism between civil society and state by an analysis of the complexities of the construction of a post-neoliberal state from the bottom up. Kingsbury's dissertation displays an interesting attempt to combine theoretical political reflection with on the ground ethnographic insights without excessively privileging or overemphasizing its role. The reading of the Bolivarian Revolution as a political process originated from the social could not ignore this dimension. Kingsbury's dissertation manages to balance its purposefully polemic objective with cautionary reminders about the limitations and difficulties of the revolutionary process.

The introduction serves to set the stage and scope of the whole text. In it Kingsbury display the theoretical vocabulary that supports his main thesis: in contemporary Venezuelan politics the construction of a post-neoliberal state inhabits a distance or gap between constituent and constituted power. In that light, one of the main objectives of the introduction is to show how statehood has come back as a central pivot for the transformation and practical dismantling of

neoliberalism. Contrary to the leftist call for an exodus from the state the Venezuelan case will be a primary example of how social forces can imagine a different path to building a post-neoliberal or socialist state. Kingsbury conceives of the state as one of many social antagonisms, deemphasizing, but not reducing, its centrality as an important space of antagonism. For Kingsbury social forces are the motor of politics but are not reducible to it. As Kingsbury asks, “Does constituted power feed from and drain constituent power? Or do the two work together in something of a tandem manner?” His answer will frame the entire dissertation: between constituted and constituent power there resides a “productive/creative tension or dialectic” (p. 44) out of which the state emerges as sort of byproduct. In order to support this thesis Kingsbury will critique the ways we have naturalized the dialectic between constituent and constituted power. The objective of this reading will be to unmask the liberal contractual assumptions behind radical leftist political theory.

The first chapter interrogates different ways to read constituent power. The chapter analyses how the notions of the people and multitude were used in the reflections that followed upon three instantiations of constituent power: the 1989 *caracazo*, the failed counter coup against Chávez in 2002 and the oil strikes of 2003. The chapter proceeds by moving between the state’s discursive appropriations of these uprisings and their consequences for political theory. Following Enrique Dussel and Antonio Negri the chapter reconstructs the notions of people and multitude. This leads Kingsbury to suggest that, in line with his general hypothesis regarding the basic in-between nature of constituent and constituted power, the dissection of people and multitude also inhabits an intermediate space or gap. Kingsbury calls this intermediate space the “government of ungovernability” (p. 64) in order to describe the persistence of a constituent autonomy even at the center of state power itself. The author’s provocative suggestion is that the construction of a new form of constituted power cannot depend on the modern liberal conceptions of the state. Rather, constituted power can be conceived as a permeable zone of antagonism.

Chapter two argues against the uncritical imposition of theories of populism onto the Venezuelan case, thus and questioning the limitations of the discourse about populism in general. The chapter balances this critical movement by proposing a different theoretical cartography in order to read contemporary politics in Latin America and beyond. Kingsbury’s main criticism of the theoretical discourse about populism is its incapacity to go beyond the limits of the modern liberal conception of the state. For Kingsbury theories of populism belong to what he calls the anxiety for social change: the simultaneous embrace and fear of the multitude. Through a selective engagement with the work of the Modernity/Coloniality Group (headed by the Enrique Dussel, Aníbal Quijano, Walter Mignolo and Arturo Escobar) and critical social science studies, the chapter describes how populism still forms part of an ideology of development understood as a modern path of reform within the world system. Simultaneously, the chapter acknowledges the presence of a coloniality of power commanding the discourses about populism. Kingsbury also recognizes the dismissal or under-theorization of the subjective dimension present in the Modernity/Coloniality group’s account of populism. This insight serves as a nuance balance for the critical account of populism and also as a transition for the next chapter.

The third chapter is a critical assessment of populism and hegemony theory. If chapter two argues for the basic symmetry and non-threatening relation between populism and the modern liberal state, here Kingsbury furthers this criticism by theorizing the post-neoliberal state in

Venezuela beyond the bounds of proposing a separation of populism theory. For Kingsbury radical democracy proponents such as Ernesto Laclau, Benjamín Ardití and Margaret Canovan fail to address the stabilizing role that populism plays in the representational logic of the modern nation-state (p. 182). The chapter's main section engages in a critical review of Ernesto Laclau's hegemony theory: "Laclau's conceptualization is one of representation and surfaces, equating politics with the management and incorporation of differential 'demands' that have been translated into the universal and legible idiom of constituted power rather than the struggle between modes of being. Laclau seeks neither to disrupt nor to reform the current order. He posits it." (p. 205). Against the understanding of hegemony as an antagonism of representation and compromise, Kingsbury call for a reading of the Bolivarian Revolution as a site where the contested meaning of the people could serve the goal of social transformation, thus evading capture by the representational structure already in place. In this light, Kingsbury argues, populism differs from social revolution in that the former seeks to maintain the present organization of society.

Chapter four elaborates on the place of myth within the Bolivarian Revolution. The chapter recasts Marxist debates on myth to frame a discussion about what Kingsbury call the *habitus* of the postneoliberal Bolivarian Venezuela. The chapter takes up the suggestion from the previous chapter regarding the importance of the subjective dimension in the revolutionary process. In this case the author proposes a reconsideration of the role of myth by elaborating on its persistence, especially in the recurrence of the figure of Simón Bolívar and oil. Kingsbury argues that contemporary *Bolivarismo* occupies a central role in the constitution of political subjectivities in contemporary Venezuela. The chapter elaborates on the productive convergence of myth and ideology by arguing against a complete dismissal of myth and for its potential for creating a socialist imaginary. Following Pierre Bourdieu up to a point, the chapter proposes that the construction of affects, practices and common senses contribute not to solidifying the status quo but rather to recreating of the multitude itself. *Habitus*, according to Kingsbury, names the active horizontal process by which narratives about statehood, progress, oil and Bolívar are continuously been rewritten and rearranged. The chapter concludes up suggesting that the Bolivarian Revolution contributes to a "reawakening of politics after the defeat of actually existing socialism and the ongoing crisis of the neoliberal model" beyond the confines of Venezuela (p. 276).

The fifth chapter centers on the question of a present and future after neoliberalism in Venezuela. Kingsbury discusses the place of socialist discourse in the definition of the Venezuelan ideological constellation. The chapter proceeds by exploring how the structural adjustments at the economic level are central for the analysis of contemporary Venezuela. It surveys the regional impact and extent to which neoliberalism modifies and also solidifies political structures in certain countries. The question of how the so-called "pink tide" or "left turn" in Latin America modified neoliberal hegemony in the region becomes central to the way Kingsbury understands Venezuela's leading role in this process. Kingsbury asks how democracy, or the relation between constituent and constituted power, looks in Bolivarian Venezuela. The reorganization of society that neoliberalism carried to Venezuela was only retroactively recognized. Kingsbury suggest that the new *habitus* created by the multitude counterbalances its neoliberal other by forcing the state to face the "multitudinous and fugitive forms taken by constituent power in Venezuela" (p. 340).

The conclusion signals the necessity of systematically thinking on post-liberal regimes in what the author understands as post-neo-liberal moment. According to Kingsbury the democratic impulse of contemporary Venezuela has not emerged from the electoral system, but rather from the irruption of the multitude. This section builds upon the ways in which the state appropriation of these moments has shifted the conception of the state itself. The Bolivarian Revolution, Kingsbury argues, should not be conflated or confused either with rhetoric nor with the person of Chávez. Its effects, even when contested and fragile, are to be seen as a transformation of the relationship between social forces and state power.

Donald V. Kingsbury's dissertation, *State and Power after Neoliberalism in Bolivarian Venezuela* is a sophisticated and innovative work. The dissertation combines political theory and conjunctural analyses of contemporary Venezuela through the author's informed readings in political theory and international politics. More importantly, it offers nuanced insights and alternative theoretical avenues to think politics and statehood in Latin America in the wake of neoliberalism.

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