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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Devil and Florentino: Specters of Petro-Populism in Venezuela

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Abstract

Scholarship on the political economy of natural resources in the Global South has often relied on the concept of the "resource curse" to explain the negative features of extractive economies and their alleged tendency to promote rent capture at the expense of national sovereignty and development. Such theories link the behavior of social actors to an excess of "unearned income," with little reference to the concrete forms of political and cultural mediation that reproduce this structure of growth. This article explores the role of the devil symbol in populist discourse in Venezuela and how this spectral figure comes to mediate subaltern consciousness. Tracing the origins of this image to colonialism and efforts to grasp the dynamics of the modern petrostate, the analysis shows how use of this symbol to mediate the forecast transition from a rentier to a productive economy has given workers in a state enterprise a potent set of signs to articulate opposition to unjust labor conditions. Venezuelan leaders have deployed figures drawn from local folklore to divide society into two competing power blocs. Yet, while these discourses are effective at forging coalitions and justifying specific reallocations of oil wealth, they do not obviate the tensions of this transition, and a counternarrative using these same figures has arisen in response. The article concludes with an analysis of parallels between global theories of the resource curse and local Venezuelan iterations of this discourse as well as a discussion of the role of translation in theories of culture and modernity.

Keywords: petroleum; populism; Venezuela; nationalism; the devil; resource curse; commodity fetishism; agriculture; development

> It is my belief, by the way, not only that those who read me will, in time, come to understand my inner turmoil, but also that in the long run, it will not be foreign to them, either."
>
> —Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus* (1947)

Introduction

In the fall of 2006, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez grabbed news headlines around the world with a now infamous speech to the United Nations. The speech was

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the culmination of a war of words between the United States and his socialist government which had brought the two countries to the brink of open strife, amid a more general breakdown in diplomatic relations. The row had taken on an especially personal dimension in the form of an acrimonious conflict between the leaders of the two nations, with each side regularly accusing the other of destabilizing the region. For his part, U.S. President George W. Bush accused Chávez of stifling democracy and supporting terrorism, as evidenced by his choice of Middle Eastern allies, while the Venezuelan President accused Bush of himself flirting with dictatorship and masterminding the coup that sought to oust Chávez's democratically elected government from power four years earlier. With both sides faulting the other for the escalating tensions, the outbreak of war seemed an increasingly plausible scenario, as the two leaders headed for an inevitable clash.

That was the setting when, in late September, Bush and Chávez were scheduled to speak at a session of the UN General Assembly. Speaking on the U.S. campaign for democracy in the Middle East and the prospects for change, Bush portrayed the United States as the global defender of "human rights" and "civilization" against what he called "the enemies of humanity." But any pretensions to universal consent for Bush's agenda were shattered the next day when the Venezuelan leader was given the chance for a rebuttal. Addressing the Assembly at the podium where the U.S. President had spoken the day before, the Venezuelan leader declared that the imperial ambitions of the United States were a threat to the survival of humanity, and he professed pity for the American people because, in his words, "the devil is in their house." Leaving no doubt as to the intended target of his remark, Chávez went on to assert, "The devil was here yesterday," adding that he could still detect the lingering "smell of sulfur" as he crossed himself (Stout 2006). The remark garnered a mixture of laughter and applause from the audience, suggesting a lack of consensus for the U.S. project in the Middle East, but in the ensuing media frenzy, the reaction of many North American journalists was to portray this "tirade" on the part of the Venezuelan leader as the ravings of a madman.

Interpreting Chávez's reference to the devil as evidence of his irrationality and the danger he posed to the world community, several newsmakers wondered aloud if Venezuela's leader might be unstable and insinuated not so subtly that he should not have been allowed to speak. Even those liberal commentators who were less sympathetic to the Bush administration and its petro-adventures abroad were similarly unsure how to respond to the hyperbolic claim that he was in league with—if not the direct incarnation of—absolute evil. The few journalists who could acknowledge the Venezuelan President's democratic credentials suggested he could only have been elected by an equally irrational nation (Zuckerman 2005; Lupien 2015). As if to defend the claim, television news reports flashed footage of Chávez speaking to throngs of supporters from a balcony in Venezuela's capital, Caracas, as ecstatic crowds showered him with adoration.

The readiness of North American media outlets to pathologize the Venezuelan leader and the nation he represented is indicative of a wider problem with the colonial gaze on the region. Subjected to a continual process of "othering," the peoples, nations, and discourses of the developing world are routinely presented as the irrational opposites of the developed North/West (Escobar 1995; Coronil 1997). From the perspective of the U.S. media, Chávez fit the template of "insane third world dictator"—a stock trope more than sufficient to explain his "strange" speech. This was hardly the first time, in other words, that cultural particularity or idiosyncrasy had been mistaken for insanity. As if reading from a prepared script, the U.S. media generated caricatures of the Venezuelan leader that allowed for easy comparisons with the Ayatollah Khomeini and other obscurantist leaders who had previously satanized the United States—figures they judged were not ready for primetime, or modernity for that matter (Schoen and Rowan 2009: 8–9 et passim; see Beeman 2008; Edwards 1989).

Lacking any interpretive framework except for madness or the irrationality of populism, the U.S. media coverage left the underlying meaning of the speech obscure. Few journalists paused to investigate what "the devil" could mean in the cultural context of Venezuela or how the symbol related to friction between the two leaders (for analysis of U.S. media portrayals of Chávez, see Boykoff 2009). With superficial media analysis and the grievances of resource-exporting nations far off stage, the discourse was largely inscrutable to U.S. audiences. But if journalists had bothered to dig a little deeper, they might have grasped its logic.[1]

Long a part of the syncretic cultures of Latin America, the devil symbol is not only used to castigate foreign leaders or a widely perceived degradation of society's values. In Venezuela, the devil symbol is also used to identify the negative effects of the petroleum economy and the fraught position of the nation-state in the global system. In this article, I explore use of the symbol to signify the ironic character of oil, as a source of fabulous wealth and a spiritual disorder afflicting society. As a central trope of a populist discourse, which seeks to unify social groups affected by the decline of Venezuela's petro-welfare state, the devil directs popular anger toward "an oligarchy," or caste of elites tied to the circulation of oil rent. This discourse, which counterposes a spectral evil to a virtuous figure in local legend, recognizes the defects of the Venezuelan nation but also holds out hope for their overcoming as part of a political transition, which organizes the *populus* to "reclaim sovereignty."

Signaling a return to the petro-boom politics of the 1970s, this discourse constitutes *el pueblo* or the popular sectors of Venezuelan society—literally "the people"—as protagonists in an epic battle for the soul of the nation. Yet, for all its power, the devil is not univocal. To explore the multiaccentuality of this sign (Volosinov 1986), I enter into dialog with classic studies of Latin America's devil cults (e.g., Nash 1993[1979]; Taussig 1980; Harris 1989; Edelman 1994; Nugent 1996; Crain 2009; Gordillo 2004; Gregory 2006; McNeish 2013) to deconstruct the feelings of turpitude that haunt Venezuela's national psyche. Drawing on fieldwork in the *Centro Técnico Productivo Socialista Florentino*, a state enterprise in the western plains, I analyze critiques of labor by workers who deploy the devil symbol in ways that diverge from its use by political elites. It is a divergence that offers critical insights into the character of subaltern consciousness, and which allows me to bring farm workers' ideas into dialog with the systems of organized power that seek to control them. The literature on devil imagery in Latin America has shown how the symbol taps into the experience of subaltern groups, including histories of violent dispossession and exploitation. But it has yet to fully explore the ways in which populist leaders can seize upon these images to articulate critiques of extractive capitalism and build political coalitions that ironically end up reproducing these same rentier economies.

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[1] The attempts to portray Chávez as insane continued up to, and even after, his death. see Andy Soltis, "OK, Hugo to Hell Now! Venezuela's Loony Leftist Chavez Croaks," *New York Post,* 6 Mar. 2013.

Closely mirroring the rhetoric of populist leaders, theories of "the resource curse" stress the ability of extractive revenues to dictate the fate of nations, often to the exclusion of forces operating at the local and global scales (ibid.). Likewise, studies of populism have tended to adopt a national framing, which treats the political cultures of nation-states as bounded wholes, limiting ability to translate across cultural boundaries (see Brubaker 2020). However, as Fernando Coronil argued, Venezuelan history cannot be "…contained within fixed temporal, cultural, or territorial boundaries" (1997: xi), and analysis of its subaltern struggles requires that scholars interrogate the categories, which organize discourse on the world system, while recognizing the power of such categories to shape collective consciousness.[2] This analysis, thus, seeks to widen the scope of inquiry beyond the narrow confines afforded by theories of "the resource curse" to gain new purchase on extractive capitalism and its reifications as well as a comparative perspective on populism that transcends "imperial geographies" (Coronil 2019: 315–22).

The Smell of Sulfur

One of the first things that truly struck me when I started fieldwork in the western plains of Venezuela in early 2007 was how often I heard disparaging remarks about the nation and its people. Anywhere people gathered to talk in the state of Barinas—in places like neighborhood cafes, bars, and bodegas—you could hear the aspersions being cast: "Venezuelans are lazy," "Venezuelans are malicious," and even "This country is a piece of shit [*este país es una mierda*]." In contrast to the stark and unwavering nationalism I had grown up with in the U.S. South, epitomized by slogans like "My country, right or wrong," or "If you don't love it, leave it," patriotic feeling in Venezuela seemed shot through with a deep ambivalence.[3] Indisputably, Venezuelans had a strong sense of national pride and identity, but this feeling was accompanied by what I interpreted as a great deal of negative sentiment.

After nearly two decades of turmoil and the eclipse of the myth of Venezuela's "exceptional democracy," which held that the wealth of the petrostate had negated class conflict (Ellner and Tinker-Salas 2007), Venezuelans were prone to severe criticism of their fellow citizens and leaders. But these deprecating remarks were not just directed at particular individuals, or a political system badly in need of reform. Rather, they were critiques of the society as a whole, and a corruption imagined as having penetrated to its very depths. These critiques of social degradation kept returning to two central motifs: sin—whether of original or more recent vintage—and excrement—a sign of waste that indexed the valueless-ness of the contaminated object. These motifs, which could easily be interpreted as a Freudian psychic economy of pollution and expenditure (Raitt 2002; see Douglas 1966), were also linked to the territorial body of the nation and the social body of citizens (Coronil 1997: 67–100).

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[2] Like prior modes of production, capitalism depends on extraction of natural resources, but its distinct value form and division into sectors occludes depletion and exhaustion of its ecological foundations. Scholars who suggest that "extractivism" is a logic newly elevated to the level of the world-system miss that capitalism has *never been* metabolically reproductive or stable.

[3] Trumpism's slogans exhibit a similar ambivalence ("Make America Great *Again*"), albeit with a different ideological polarity.

During my first few weeks in Florentino—a Ministry of Agriculture enterprise built on the grounds of a former *latifundio*, seized from its private owner in 2005—I used my position as a foreign researcher to get to know the workers and ask questions about their everyday lives. To grasp workers' worldviews and allow them to present themselves in what I thought would be a favorable light, I asked a classic fieldwork question, "What is the average Venezuelan like?" I was surprised to receive the answer that the average Venezuelan was a "*malandro*," or anti-social criminal, who cared little for his neighbors and was willing to harm others to secure his own interests (Ferrándiz 2004; Vargas 2007). As it turned out, crime was a regular topic of conversation in this industrial farm, tasked with cultivation of staple crops for state food-security programs, and it was not unusual to hear workers describe Venezuelans as "natural-born criminals" or apply the language of street crime to officials, with workers declaring they had "*un gobierno de malandros*," or a government of thugs.

With high rates of crime giving rise to generalized feelings of vulnerability glossed as *la inseguridad* (Briceño-Leon, Avil, and Camardiel 2009; Samet 2019), it was not surprising to hear Florentino workers mobilize a discourse of a loss of values. Workers professed that you could no longer trust "the man on the street" and that the bonds of intimacy and virtue, which had once characterized the nation, had been severed. These rural laborers, who spent their days swinging machetes, driving trucks, and tending cattle grazing on the farm's 4,000 hectares, counted the breakdown of "the traditional family" and rise of a vulgar consumer culture, or *consumismo*, as leading causes of the insecurity.[4] But workers also suspected it was not just consumptive desires or broken families that drove the wave of violence.

Given the high frequency of murder and robbery in Venezuela, it was hard not to suspect something was deeply wrong with society. It was even harder not to suspect something was deeply wrong with Venezuela's government, when nearly every month a high-ranking official was found to have been laundering money or charged with extortion. The more time I spent in Florentino, the more I realized why workers used such harsh language to describe their nation, and why so many felt this model enterprise with its neatly manicured lawns and pastel-painted outbuildings, was a utopian "fantasy," which clashed with "Venezuelan reality." However, I had yet to put all these images together as part of an affective discourse that could be used by political leaders to gain consent. This realization would come later following several incidents in the farm.

In the early afternoons, a fog rose from the rivers in the western plains of Venezuela, as the tropical sun heated the water flowing over ancient bedrock. The current exposed layers of sediment, long trapped beneath the surface, and the water evaporated, releasing a distinct odor into the air. The unpleasant smell carried on the wind was a subject of remarks by workers in Florentino, but I confess to having not given them much thought, taking the remarks literally. I later realized that these references were evidence of a deeper disquiet, however. One day, while riding with workers to one of the project sites in the farm, we crossed over a stream, and our truck driver turned to me, and asked, "Do you smell that?" I did not have to stick my head out the window to catch the foul odor. "It's sulfur. Our whole country smells of

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[4] Criticism chiefly focuses on single-parent households and men's failure to fulfill patriarchal obligations, for example, abandonment of children. My informant's struggle to build a stable household in a context of tense labor relations and instability is the fulcrum for my analysis of populist discourse.

Image 1. Florentino Headquarters. Author's photo.

sulfur." The slightly pained look on his face, and the guilt it conveyed, signaled his intended meaning. When taken in light of previous conversations on insecurity and corruption, it was clear this miasma was fueling speculation that there might be a relationship between the nation's geology and the behavior of its citizens.

Over time, I learned many Florentino workers believed that Venezuela's oil wealth was a Faustian bargain and that the resource was responsible for some of the nation's greatest virtues but also some of its greatest ills (Hellinger 2006). As the critical component of an ecologically destructive economy, whose extractive processes release a smell commonly linked with the biblical cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, it is not unreasonable to expect that a thick, black liquid pumped from the bowels of the earth would readily conjure associations with the underworld. But more work is required to show why the fossil fuel that is responsible for Venezuela's relative affluence and historically high standards of living is depicted as a malevolent force, and why otherwise patriotic people should refer to their nation as "a piece of excrement."

Analyses of devil cults in Latin America have explored how the symbol comes to host affective associations which link shifts in material economies to shifts in ethico-moral values as well as how the figure mediates tensions in the wake of rapid social change. The devil symbol has been deployed by groups as diverse as tin miners, plantation workers, indigenous *campesinos*, tourism agents, and urban street-performers, to name just a few (Nash 1993[1979]; Taussig 1980; Gordillo 2004; Gregory 2006; Riggio, Marino, and Paolo Vignolo 2015). One interpretation common to the work of scholars like Nash (1993[1979]), Taussig (1980), Edelman (1994), Nugent (1996), and Weismantel (2001) is that the devil and other spectral figures mediate the destructive effects of capitalist production and exchange as well as the social dislocation that results from illicit or occluded forms of wealth accumulation (see also Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Ong 1987; Gregory 2006; cf. Haynes 2013). While critically instructive, the analyses of these scholars are specific to their own contexts and should not be over-generalized.

An analysis of the devil symbol in Venezuela must be situated in its own socio-historical milieu, and it cannot be divorced from the specific political economy to which the symbol refers. The idea that the devil is present (albeit invisibly) in everyday life, and acts upon social relationships, is widely held in Venezuela. But the mere existence of such a belief does not explain why certain events are attributed to malevolent agency, while others are not, nor why certain causal connections should prove more convincing than others (see Tambiah 1990; Evans-Pritchard 1937). Why the symbol is attached to specific activities is a question that can be studied empirically but which requires that cultural discourses be treated as reasonable—although inevitably partial—explanations of reality, which are not always able to reflexively account for their own emergence.[5]

The Devil's Excrement

The history of Venezuela in the early twentieth century was indelibly marked by the rise of oil and a series of reifications (Lukács 1972), which accounted for the industry's impact on society. The start of commercial exploitation of petroleum had a profound effect on society as well as citizen-state relations. Prior to the First World War, Venezuelan governments were chronically short of revenue and unable to enact nation-building projects. Yet, with the sudden influx of oil rent from foreign energy corporations, the Venezuelan state was able to take on a new leading role. Having previously fallen victim to the gunboat diplomacy of its creditors (McBeth 2002), Venezuela was now able to pay off its debts and enact a host of public works projects, converting the political-bureaucratic apparatus into a vehicle of economic progress.

In his seminal study of the Venezuelan petrostate, Fernando Coronil (1997) analyzes the effects of this rentier economy on the practice of statecraft and popular consciousness. Offering a critique of what he calls "Occidentalism," or representational practices which portray Western societies as "the home of modernity," while casting non-Western societies as "marginal to global history," Coronil suggests that resource-exporting nations like Venezuela are recursively depicted as "Others of a Western self," or evidence of the absence of modernity, rather than a condition for progress at the global center (see also Coronil 2019). In reality, societies like Venezuela are integral parts of the world system with their own "subaltern modernity," built on a series of reified images which justify specific patterns of capital accumulation. One of the characteristic reifications linked with Venezuelan modernity is "the deification of the state in everyday life."

The fetishized image of the Venezuelan state as a unitary agency, standing above society, which is capable of reconciling conflicts among competing social groups, is aided by the ground rent that accrues to the state's custodians, and which can be allocated without need for labor to mediate transactions. The capacity of state actors to allocate rent without enhancing productivity gave political elites the power to forge an "expansive form of hegemony" (Smith 2011), which integrated surplus populations on the basis of citizenship, without challenging Venezuela's structural position in the world system. But there were, of course, limits to this wealth and power. Rent capture in the raw materials industry is a variant of extractive capitalism with limited temporal horizons that seeks to maximize profit by externalizing ecological costs, while reducing outlays for fixed capital and variable capital in wages (see Arboleda 2020). This strategy for reaping higher rates of return reproduces itself at the expense of the development of the productive forces and labor's leverage over capital.

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[5] My interpretative stance is close to what Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1993) calls "critical relativism," a stance which seeks not only to empathetically grasp the worldview of informants but also to expose the limits of cultural knowledge.

As one such regime, Venezuela's oil-rent economy promoted patterns of growth in which the average rate of return in the non-energy sectors was less than what could be obtained by investing in extraction or activities linked to it. This, along with imperatives to curb social conflict, compelled state and non-state actors to optimize incomes via rent reallocation. Instead of creating a climate suitable for non-energy exports, which would have entailed strategic investments in production and restrictions on profit rates, Venezuelan leaders opted to increase local purchasing power via the national currency, facilitating imports of consumer and capital goods. The highly valued currency and exchange rates tied to the U.S. dollar meant oil rent tended to multiply in services, rather than industry, and that the deluge of petrodollars incentivized political leaders to act as "masters of largesse" for returns, which could not be absorbed productively (Baptista and Mommer 1986; Coronil and Skurski 1982).

Indeed, as Coronil argues, the circulation of capital absorbed the production process as "a mere phase of its motion" (1997: 390), with average citizens and enterprises being incentivized to "attract cash," rather than fabricate commodities that could lessen a growing dependence on the world market. This culture of "easy money"—or *dinero fácil*, in the local parlance—hindered the growth of stable wage jobs and use of land for anything other than low-intensity ranching and tenant farming. In the face of such "perverse incentive structures," Venezuela's industry and agriculture tended to wither, leading to the widely held stereotype that Venezuelans were "lazy" or lacking in work ethic. Yet, the circulation of petrodollars was uneven, and some citizens were better positioned to capture a portion than others.

Derogatorily referred to as *escualidos* or "squalid ones," a class of compradors working on behalf of foreign energy corporations and importer-exporters, derived the bulk of its income from control of trade and capital flows in and out of the country. Living abroad in cosmopolitan cities like Madrid, New York, and Miami, these economic elites held immense prestige and often enjoyed lavish lifestyles, which set them apart from the rest of society. This social distance, combined with ongoing reliance on flows of wealth tied to Venezuela's territory, led critics to argue these expatriates were essentially parasitic and that they had abandoned the nation.[6] In 1976, the nationalization of the energy sector gave renewed impulse to efforts to transition away from a regime of rent capture and to reduce the power of these "disloyal elites."

The creation of the state oil company, PDVSA, fostered what was widely known as "petroleum euphoria" (ibid.: 238) or the belief that Venezuela's stark poverty and inequality could be rapidly overcome and that an effective two-party political system would compel Venezuelan leaders to "sow oil" into satisfying popular demands. Putatively freed from its reliance on foreign energy corporations, Venezuela could now strengthen its sovereignty by investing in human capital and productivity. A new generation of Venezuelan professionals trained in petroleum engineering and geology would replace foreign experts in the energy sector's upstream activities, allowing for value-adding and steadier prices. Yet the ability of Venezuelans to replace foreign expertise was limited by the complexity of operations and the time required to train new professionals (Coronel 1983: 169; Karl 1997: 161). Gradually, it also became clear that these new experts constituted a privileged stratum inclined to take advantage of its structural position for enrichment.

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[6] Taussig argues, "the man who sets himself apart from the rest of society" is regarded as a harbinger or servant of the devil (1980: xvii). Venezuelan elites in cosmopolitan centers like Miami and Madrid are often targets of accusations of illicit wealth accumulation.

The high salaries garnered by experts, along with "informal profit opportunities" afforded by the industry, resulted in preservation of the social distance between the petroleum sector and average Venezuelans, even as circulation of new revenues failed to absorb surplus labor created by a rural exodus. The trade unions which emerged to defend the interests of oil workers, meanwhile, equally served as a brake on the development of more radical social and labor movements. Closely aligned with the social-democratic party, *Acción Democrática*, PDVSA's unions enjoyed higher wage rates than the rest of the workforce, and this labor aristocracy worked to preserve these special benefits by throwing its weight behind nation-building projects, which created jobs without challenging existing property relations.

In the late 1970s, Venezuela went on a construction spree, investing its now ample resources in public infrastructure (Muñoz 1998). Venezuelan governments also funded mixed public-private enterprises in a variety of areas. But in practice, these enterprises were rarely competitive, and whatever profits they created were frequently used to sustain a caste of bureaucrats, rather than improve efficiency or industrial technique. These systemic inefficiencies were disguised, however, by gains in a flourishing real estate and services sector. Overnight, parts of Venezuela were transformed into cosmopolitan centers, as tall buildings and skyscrapers arose as if from nowhere in the capital and other coastal cities. The lifestyles of Venezuela's new urban elites and the morphology of these cities relegated most citizens to social-geographic margins, but the country's unprecedented affluence convinced many Venezuelans that recycling oil surpluses into rent or interest-bearing assets could be perpetuated indefinitely. Among the skeptics was the former Oil Minister and architect of OPEC Juan Pablo Pérez Alfonzo.

In the late 1960s, Pérez Alfonzo had been one of "the prophets of petroleum," extolling its virtue and ability to liberate Venezuela from underdevelopment (Coronil 1997). Yet by the mid-1970s, he had become one of its most vociferous critics. In an interview given shortly before his death in 1979, he excoriated Venezuela's economic policy, coining a phrase that would later become common currency: "Ten years from now, twenty years from now, you will see: oil will bring us ruin. It brings nothing but trouble. It hasn't brought us any benefits. Look at all this waste, corruption, consumption, and public services falling apart—and debt—debt we shall have for many years. I call oil "the devil's excrement"—we are sinking in the devil's excrement" (quoted in Karl 1997). The unbalanced growth on which Venezuela's prosperity depended was unsustainable, and a decade later, when oil prices fell, his dire predictions came true.

At the height of the petro-boom, oil was called a "new religion," and conservatives wary of its influence suggested the commodity was worshipped like a false idol (Straka 2003). Oil financed a fast-paced, urban, consumer society and catapulted Venezuela into the fraternity of modern nations, making it into a fetish of progress. Portrayed as the "blessing" which had delivered society from poverty and backwardness, oil was construed as a force capable of overcoming any obstacle. Yet the resource's exceptional power led some Venezuelans to question whether they had sovereignty over oil, or it had sovereignty over them.

As one observer wrote at the time, "…petroleum has seeped into every pore and taken ownership of the nation" (Rangel: 1970: 4). Oil had introduced petrodollars and the logic of rent capture into virtually every aspect of life from labor to consumption habits, and Venezuela's citizens, who had once been mostly employed in agriculture, now largely resided in urban slums, heavily reliant on food imports. State enterprises were also highly vulnerable to price swings on global markets, and these industries could be severely prejudiced by currency revaluations undertaken to balance the energy sector with external conditions. By the late 1970s, Venezuela's home market was effectively a massive rent-redistribution scheme, with low rates of investment and wages almost entirely divorced from productivity (DiJohn 2009). Not surprisingly, as the OPEC crisis abated and energy prices bottomed out, Venezuela experienced capital flight and violent instability.

After the Caracazo riots of 1989, which by some estimates left upwards of three thousand people dead (Coronil and Skurski 1991), "the devil's excrement" came increasingly to be attached to the nation in popular discourse. Having cast their lot with oil, many Venezuelans viewed themselves as possessing a deep-seated or tragic flaw, which made them susceptible to the lure of the trade. Average citizens interpreted the ruin visited on society as punishment for greed and non-productive gains equated with sin. Consequently, the metaphor of the devil's excrement morphed from an economic critique into a moral-social critique, as Venezuelans now used self-deprecating phrases like *Somos una mierda* or "We are pieces of shit," to condemn the pursuit of individual wealth at the cost of collective welfare (Coronil 1997: 353–54 et passim).

Populist Demagoguery and Organic Crisis

At first glance, it may seem strange to argue that citizens referring to their nation as "a waste product" is an example of nationalism. But the metaphor of the devil's excrement must be interpreted in light of a nationalist imagination that is qualitatively different from the liberal discourses of the Global North. Citizens of Western Europe and North America are often accustomed to talk of their nation's great achievements and pride in a glorious past, which even if largely invented (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), still foreshadows the nation's present merits. These achievements serve as evidence of "the bright future ahead," and the nation's status as a moral community (and in some cases, its right to impose its will on others). One can fault a portion of society for its defects—for example, the specific government in power, ethno-religious minorities, or fifth columns—but the morality of the nation itself is rarely if ever questioned. However, as Joel Robbins (1998) stresses, negative sentiments can equally contribute to identification with a national community, and such feelings may be just as powerful as the forms of self-ascription grounded in overt displays of honor and pride (see also Cohn and Dirks 1988; Herzfeld 1997; Urban 1994).[7]

While drawing on some of the same tropes as liberalism in the Global North, Venezuela's left populism has a distinct temporality, which lends itself to specific images and metaphors.[8] In contrast to its competitors, Hugo Chávez's political movement sought to "return" Venezuela to "its original path" by fulfilling an historic mission that was never fully achieved. This brand of left populism affirms the history of nineteenth-century Venezuela as its sacred touchstone, for example the cult of the revolution, and Simón Bolívar (see Anderson 1983), but it also operates by way of an existential contradiction between the early history of the Republic and Venezuela's current status as an underdeveloped nation, whose stark deficiencies stand in contrast with this august legacy. This discourse involves a delicate dance between affirming the moral nature of the nation and deploying signs of its debasement, while pledging to return the nation to a path that will allow it to become "what it should always have been." This dialectic of "virtuous being," but "corrupted becoming," is the force which held together a national-popular consensus (Gramsci 1971) in what came to be known as "The Bolivarian Revolution." But this articulation, it should be stressed, is not solely under elite control.

As Iselin Strønen argues, studies of the Venezuelan petrostate have focused on elite powerplays and largesse, but they have had less to say about "…how subaltern lives were actually lived in the shadows of oil-fueled spectacles" (2017: 7). The question of how "the idea of the state" as a fount of justice that stands behind the play of ordinary politics (Abrams 1988) was preserved in the face of stark inequality and systemic failures cannot be answered solely by reference to the state's ties with petroleum. In addition, an analysis of state fetishism must show how castigation of a segment of society that controls the flow of oil wealth through the political-bureaucratic apparatus allows, "the recapture of the state" to become the logical answer to the nation's moral and material dilemmas, and how modes of political power that seek to alter the balance of class forces can harness, but equally restrict, subaltern agency (Hall 1979).

In 1999, Hugo Chávez came to power, pledging to lift up a nation widely perceived as having descended into the depths of depravity. Attacking the graft and corruption endemic to The Fourth Republic (1958–1998), Venezuela's newly elected leader vowed to "clean up" the state bureaucracy and rid the political system of clientelism (López-Maya and Lander 2000). The Fifth Republic that he founded allegedly differed from its predecessors due to its fidelity to the ideals of Simón Bolívar, and its decisive break with neoliberal economic policies. In his first term, Chávez launched a series of "social missions" to improve access to education, healthcare, housing, and jobs (see Ivancheva 2023; Cooper 2019; Zúquete 2008) and drew tremendous support, but his government

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[7] Herzfeld's observation that nineteenth-century nationalists conceived of the nation as "culturalized nature" has special resonance in Venezuela where oil, "the natural body of the nation," is conceived to contaminate the "social body" (Coronil 1997: 67-100).

[8] I agree with Robbins (1998) that "negative nationalism" is widespread across the Global South. Yet whereas in his case "trans-localism" is the pivot for critical evaluation of the nation and discourses favoring a transcendent sense of Christian belonging, my case shows how Christian iconography reaffirms the nation and bolsters national identity against centrifugal, trans-local forces. Indeed, I would argue such evaluations are not purely "negative" since they become a source of pride: for example, "Venezuelans are clever and know how to survive."

Image 2. Statue of “The Liberator” in the Plaza Bolívar, Barinas. Author’s photo.

soon faced a military coup, a strike in the oil sector, and a recall referendum organized by the opposition (La Fuente and Meza 2012).

During the 2004 recall election, Chávez styled his campaign to stay in office as the “Second Battle of Santa Inés” and “Misión Florentino,” references steeped in Venezuelan history and folklore.[9] In these and other speeches, he would draw direct linkages between the defeat of “the oligarchy,” the end of the rentier economy, and the nation’s moral regeneration. In one such discourse, Chávez underscored,

> “…oil was a curse because it made us used to easy money. Pérez Alfonzo said so in his way: “We are sinking in the devil’s excrement.” We became used to easy money. Insert a tube—an oil well—and sell it. Almost all the income of the nation has come from this avenue.… What does it cost to make oil? Nothing. Who makes oil? It is mother earth that makes oil. It is extracted with relative ease and after it is sold, we import everything—this oil-rent model was also imported. We have to put an end to this model…” (Chávez 2010, my translation).

Such linkages of the circulation of oil-rent with diabolical forces would become a regular feature of my fieldwork in a farming project dedicated to the recovery of land for productive use.

A few months into my stay in the Florentino enterprise, the devil made his first appearance. It was right before federal elections, and pro-government news media were busy demonizing the political opposition. News channels ran a series of television ads featuring photos of the leaders who tried to overthrow the Venezuelan government in 2002. The images of the coup plotters were overlaid with images of blood running in the streets and a caption that read, "The true face of fascism." The faces of the plotters then morphed into a black-bearded figure with a nefarious smile accompanied by the sound of sinister laughter: the classic image of Satan. The ad was arresting, and I recall thinking it must have been the work of savvy media consultants (for analysis of pro-Chavista media, see Schiller 2013; Samet 2019). But these images meant to obtain consent from the Venezuelan *populus* did not just sow division; they were also reflective of a logic that sought to restore societal bonds.

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[9] I explain this reference shortly.

The word "demagogic" is often used to pejoratively describe populist discourse. Populism is derided as inherently "divisive" and giving rise to social disunity. Yet, as Ernesto Laclau suggests, however paradoxically, "…it is also through *demonization* of a section of the population that societies are able to reach a sense of their own cohesion" (2005: 70). Elaborating on this point, Zizek (2006) contends that populist discourse achieves social cohesion by explaining the objective position of social actors in relation to spectral figures that frustrate popular demands. "…[I]n populism, the enemy is externalized or reified into a positive ontological entity, whose annihilation would restore balance and justice…" The enemy is construed as "an intruder" or parasite to be exorcised from the social body, and concrete social actors are treated as instantiations of spectral figures. Thus, populism is built on a *double reification*, since neither "the oligarchy," nor "the people," exist as objective social groups, and the spectral figures attached to these categories are equally intangible.[10] Yet, as I delved into everyday life in Florentino, and the worldviews of the workers who labored there, it became clear that these figures did promote a sense of unity among the Bolivarian Revolution's supporters.

After several weeks of fieldwork, I was still waiting to have a conversation with Florentino's Social Development Manager, who was responsible for delivery of the farm's social benefits. When I finally sat down with the manager, I still had a few simple questions about the project. One concerned the enterprise's name. When I queried its meaning, his hurried answer was, "The enterprise is called Florentino because we are fighting the devil. Those devils—*Adecos* and *Copeyanos!*" *Adecos* and *Copeyanos* were partisans of the two major parties of The Fourth Republic, which had coalesced into a fractious, if nominally unified, opposition. As we walked to his office door at the end of the interview, he could tell from my confused look that I did not entirely understand what he meant, and when I asked, "But who is Florentino?" he responded, "He's a character from a legend. It's a legend. You can go to the library and read about it." He directed me to the farm's small library where I found a copy of the book on the shelves.[11]

National Salvation and the Geopolitics of Evil

The legend of *Florentino y El Diablo* first emerged during the colonial period from a mixture of indigenous and Christian cosmologies. Part of the oral tradition of the

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[10] "Populism" also refers to a period in Latin-American political history. As such, the term does not always carry the same pejorative connotations as elsewhere in the world. Unlike classical liberals, I attach no intrinsically negative connotations to populism, and I use the term in a strictly analytical sense.

[11] The Ministry of Culture produced cheap copies for state bookstores across the country.

llanos, the original author of the tale is obscure after countless retellings, but the most celebrated version of the story is credited to the Venezuelan poet Alfredo Arevelo Torrealba. Known for his tales of magic and the supernatural, Torrealba's writings are said to evoke "the telluric soul of the *llano*" and the dialectic between the enchanted landscape and its inhabitants (Acevedo 2007: iv). Torrealba published two versions of the poem, the second and longer of which was published in 1956 and has since become the standard version. Set to the region's traditional musical style, *llanera*, the tale is structured as a *contrapunteo,* or dual between two singers, with each line building on, or in some way negating the previous line, until the story reaches its climactic resolution.

The story opens with Florentino making his way home at dusk along a deserted byway in the *llanos* or plains. The sun is casting long shadows when Florentino stops at a spring to quench his thirst. He casts his drinking horn into the water but struggles to "drink a drop," since at this very moment a stranger on horseback rides by saying, "Friend, if you dare, meet me in Santa Inés. I want to sing with you." Florentino does not recognize the man, whose face is hidden, but he cannot refuse an invitation to sing, so he walks to Santa Inés. When he arrives in the pueblo, Florentino sees the mysterious stranger standing in the doorway of a *rancho*, yet despite the rain and brush he should have passed through, the stranger's clothes are clean and dry. It is then that Florentino realizes this is no ordinary man. The stranger is none other than Satan, and Florentino has agreed to a test of wits which may cost him his soul. The contest, which takes the form of a series of riddles in verse, lasts all night. But at dawn, with one last lyrical flourish, Florentino solves the devil's final riddle by invoking the blessings of God, the Virgin Mary, and the Holy Trinity, and the devil is bested, as the story comes to a close.

In the late Middle Ages, the devil was closely associated with the inscrutable forces of nature and chaos beyond the social order. As Omar Lizardo writes, "…those who left the protection of the primordial community and dared to wander on their own were vulnerable to his influence" (2009: 615). In the colonial imagination, the devil, along with his familiar identification with the underworld, was thought to possess an earthly kingdom separating heaven and hell (Cañizares-Esguerra 2006). This kingdom was a battleground for angels, demons, and other supernatural figures (Pagels 1995), and Hispanic settlers brought this vision of struggle between the forces of light and dark to efforts to Christianize the Americas' indigenous inhabitants (see also Behar 1987).

The legend of *Florentino y el Diablo* more or less conforms to this schema, with the devil sometimes being read as a figure with dark, indigenous features, while Florentino is described as *catire* or "light skinned." In step with this mapping of an enchanted landscape, Florentino meets the devil in the wilderness, and the devil lures him to a settlement on the frontier under his sway. In late-modern times, however, the devil's symbolic meaning has progressively shifted, with the figure taking on human motives, such as lust, vanity, and greed (Pagels 1995). Originally a cautionary tale about wandering too far off the beaten path, *Florentino y el Diablo* has more recently come to symbolize the struggle between "civilization" and "savagery" as well as a rift in the nation between subalterns and elites.[12] One version of the story, which appears in the novel *Cantaclaro*, written by the Venezuelan man of letters and President Romulo Gallegos, symbolizes the Liberal Party's strugglewith a Conservative oligarchy in the nineteenth century as well as the Liberal Party's victory at the Battle of Santa Inés during the Federal War from 1859–1863 (Marino 2018).[13]

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[12] The Venezuelan philosopher J. M. Briceño-Leon suggests the devil may actually represent the darker side of Florentino's own nature and that the battle rages inside him (2002[1980]). There is little evidence in the

Deeply impacted by the story and its various retellings, Hugo Chávez was said to have memorized the poem's more than 350 lines, and he often recited portions during his weekly television program, *Aló Presidente.* As Katherine Verdery (1991) notes, socialist governments have historically mobilized the folk traditions of the nations they represent to depict themselves as authentic embodiments of "the people". In his role as organic intellectual, President Chávez brought together otherwise disparate, affective images and discourses into a cohesive narrative that re-signified the Florentino story as a critique of rentier dependency and the inevitable victory of his political movement. By invoking the devil as a symbol of the destructive power of petroleum and venal elites, Chávez rearticulated popular conceptions of oil as a "useless," or corrupting, form of wealth (Taussig 1980, Akin and Robbins 1999) by suggesting its revenue could be "sown" into virtuous spaces.

Embodying a departure from the elite political discourses, which have historically marginalized large sectors of Venezuelan society (Ciccariello-Maher 2013), Chávez's knowledge of the Florentino story burnished his credentials as a "man of the people" who grasped the cultural wisdom of average Venezuelans and who used their cultural traditions as a weapon in the nation's defense. Not surprisingly, this discourse also targeted Venezuela's largest oil purchaser, the United States, and the rentier elites closely aligned with it. This version of the tale mapped Venezuela's struggle with a foreign power and segments of society allied with malevolent external forces as part of a "geopolitics of evil" (Cañizares-Esguerra 2006). To bring an end to Venezuela's client status, the Venezuelan people had to rise up against this "oligarchy" and break ties with its foreign backers, a set of neocolonial relations nicely embodied in the personage of George W. Bush, President of the United States and a Texas oil baron.

Unafraid to liken himself to Florentino, Chávez cast his fledgling political movement in the role of the giant slayer, retelling the legend as a "David and Goliath story" in which Venezuela would outwit its larger, more powerful enemy and emerge victorious despite the odds. The state enterprises which Chávez's government created were concrete spaces where this "battle for the soul of the nation" was being waged, and where rural workers were cast as subjects who could redeem Venezuela with their productive labor, reaping just harvests from the oil money sown into them. But from the standpoint of those who labored in Florentino, the project was a far more ambivalent space, which led workers to create narratives that deployed the devil symbol differently.

One of my informants, Sergio, worked as a security guard at Florentino's front gate. We spent a great deal of time together due to his affable nature, but also due to his role on the farm. Tasked with recording the entry and exit of all vehicles, Sergio was responsible for preserving order and facilitating transportation to towns in the nearby area, which meant if I wanted to leave the farm I had to rely on his good graces.

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poem to support this view, but this reading fits nicely with official retellings and the critiques offered by Florentino workers of an enterprise, whose daily practice was often at odds with loftier goals.

[13] Chávez references this novel and interpretation in an interview with Spanish journalist Ignacio Ramonet (2013).

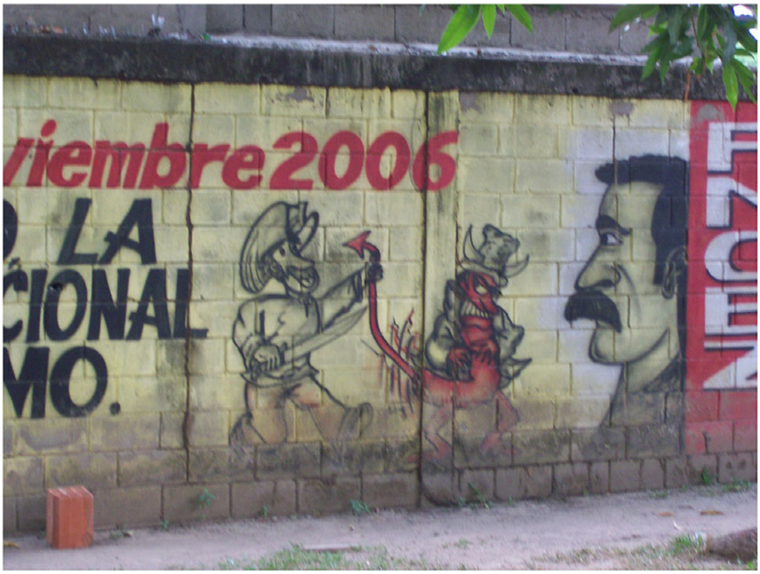

Image 3. Mural outside the office of The National Institute of Lands, Barinas. A *campesino* cuts off the devil's tail, as the Liberal Party General Ezequiel Zamora looks on. Author's photo.

In many ways, Sergio was an average Venezuelan keen to fulfill the archetypal roles set out for a man of his station. He lived several miles from the enterprise in a shack of his own construction on a parcel carved out of the wasteland between two *latifundia* estates. Sergio hoped to enjoy the honor and dignity which came from his role as masculine provider, and in that sense he was like many Venezuelans. Yet there was one area in life in which he was exceptional: he had seven children.

Sergio told me he came from a large family with four other siblings and that he wanted to have a large family himself. He had thought about stopping at six children—one more than the previous generation—but he and his wife had agreed to have another when she, too, was hired in Florentino. Although his wages were not overly generous, their combined salaries were enough to pay for the modest diet on which his family subsisted and so another mouth to feed felt like less of a risk. But Sergio faced a serious problem before the arrival of his seventh child: his family had far outgrown their *rancho*. Beyond his large family, he was distinguished from other Florentino workers by his strong critique of the enterprise's leadership style. Sergio was upset by the way managers ordered workers around, a style he thought unbefitting a socialist enterprise, which "belonged to the Venezuelan people." But more importantly, he faulted Florentino leaders for their failure to deliver social benefits that he regarded as a right.

The Devil Wins in Florentino

In the early years of Florentino, President Chávez had come to the enterprise and pledged to build houses for the workers. As Sergio recalled, "He asked us what we needed. And we said, 'We need houses, *comandante*,'" and the President replied, "Anything for the workers of Florentino." Yet not only had the work crews failed to arrive, Sergio also did not know where, or even if, he was on the list of future recipients. Like other Florentino workers, he had waited patiently for the delivery of his housing benefit, but it was repeatedly delayed for unspecified reasons. Nine months earlier, when the social development workers came to evaluate his situation, one asked him how many children he had and when he responded, “Seven,” the incredulous employee refused to believe him. Clearly thinking he was exaggerating the number to improve his chances or speed up delivery, the employee forced Sergio and his wife to assemble all seven children in front of her before she finally relented and recorded the figure. When Sergio told me this story, he was still visibly upset at the suggestion that he had lied or was somehow undeserving.

Thus, a few weeks later when managers stated in an enterprise-wide meeting that housing was taking up too much time on the agenda and that they should move on to other issues, Sergio jumped up and yelled, “It is a right! [*es un derecho*] The President said so!” Several of the other workers seated next to him followed suit, and they went on to complain that houses were first awarded to higher-level employees based on status and favoritism rather than true need and that this was another example of corruption plaguing the revolution. Sergio desired a house for his wife and children, and he felt the President’s pledge should be honored. Sadly, however, he would not be among the workers selected for the next allocation, and to make matters worse, there were now issues with payment of his salary.

It was never entirely clear to me where the source of the problem lay and why Florentino workers were not paid on time. Could it be, as managers alleged, that the enterprise was short of funds and waiting for cash infusions from PDVSA? Or had graft interdicted the funds at some other level of government? Workers like Sergio suspected Florentino managers were enriching themselves through schemes involving the housing project, but there was too much budgetary opacity to know for sure. In one especially onerous instance, the enterprise was several weeks late with Sergio’s pay, and his support network was starting to run thin. Nearly out of money and having already taken out loans from several friends and co-workers, myself included, he was desperate.

One afternoon, after a long day in the headquarters, I came upon Sergio and other workers talking in angry tones at the farm’s front gate. When I asked them what was wrong, Sergio declared, “They don’t pay us!” and then more circumspectly, “The devil is winning in Florentino.” I asked what they would do, envisioning a response focused on how they would make ends meet until their next paychecks. Instead, I was surprised when Sergio answered, “We will go out onto the highway and hold signs so that the *comandante* [i.e., President Chávez] knows what is happening in Florentino. The television stations will come, and they will tell everyone.” The tactic of blocking road networks to gain visibility is part of a long history of popular politics in Venezuela (Velasco 2015), but this action in a state enterprise was especially thought-provoking.[14]

Up until this point, I had seen little evidence of what one might call “working-class consciousness,” or a sense of collective solidarity arising from the experience of wage labor and conflicts with employers. There were no trade unions in Florentino, and the organs which might have advocated for workers—”The Socialist Labor

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[14] Another example is the so-called “*guarimbas*” or opposition-led street protests involving barricades in 2014.

Committees"—were tightly controlled by enterprise managers. Thus, this spirit of combativeness and sense of common interest emerging from shared realities intrigued me. The form of resistance Sergio and his coworkers envisioned, holding signs on the highway that ran past the farm, was conceived to bypass the enterprise hierarchy and call upon a power that could intercede on their behalf. In a move characteristic of populist politics, this tactic of *denunciation* (Samet 2019) sought to hail President Chávez as an incarnation of the popular will in hopes that it would force him to attend to his power base.

Sergio and the other workers stated that they would wait a week to act, but the protest never occurred, since a few days later their wages arrived and their anger seemed to subside. The incident was instructive, however. In giving voice to his critique, Sergio used the story of *Florentino y El Diablo* to play up the irony of corruption in a site fostering "virtuous" relationships. "The devil," or the corrupting influence of rentierism and elite wealth capture, was seeping back into a space which was supposed to have been cleansed of the devil's excrement. Old attitudes had persisted, and the enterprise was falling back into the clutches of "the oligarchy."[15] Florentino was designed to create a "social profit," which would make the enterprise self-sufficient and free it from oil revenue. But this plan required a degree of stewardship from leaders that was very much in question. Accusations of misuse of funds were rampant, and workers felt abused by delayed receipt of wages and benefits. Florentino workers, thus, mixed feelings of gratitude toward President Chávez for providing employment with a critique of a caste of bureaucrats they considered to be the source of their ongoing problems securing these rights.

Workers' social distance from Florentino's managers and the petrodollars which funded the enterprise were crucial dynamics that shaped how they made sense of their lives and developed strategies of resistance. In the context of Bolivia's tin mines, Nash argued rituals invoking the devil were "active cults for the material improvement of [workers'] lives." The devil fetish was part of a culture of transition (1993[1979]: 311), which explained the contract system and their perilous working conditions. Rituals seeking to propitiate malevolent forces could fight feelings of alienation and strengthen working-class consciousness. Not surprisingly, the devil was closely linked with strikes and rebellions. But the devil could also represent "compromise in the class struggle" in instances where employers paid for ritual sacrifices.

The lesson of this devil cult was that the symbol was one of ambivalence, and a syncretic blending of Marxist ideology with Pre-Columbian cosmology should not be read as "unnatural" or evidence of workers' "backwardness." Instead, it represented an effort by miners to make sense of harsh realities using available cultural signifiers. Nash argued that tin miners' militancy and acute awareness of the world system owed to their position in "the international exchange setting" (ibid.: xxxiii) and a global value chain in which imperial states extracted surplus from developing countries through unequal terms of exchange. Workers, in turn, had an awareness of their role in generating the extractive revenues on which their society depended and hence, of their own potentially disruptive power.[16]

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[15] So crucial was this idea of purification that a Catholic priest and an Evangelical preacher were asked to bless Florentino at its opening.

[16] Nash concludes we should anticipate "revolutionary change in the marginal populations, rather than 'the vanguard sectors of the proletariat'" (1993[1979]: xxxiii). Instead, I would argue we should look for contexts where workers have leverage which brings them into direct conflict with the state *as capital.*

Likewise, Venezuela's oil-export dependency gave Florentino workers an acute awareness of the dynamics of the world market and its impact on their society. Oil prices printed in local newspapers were a daily reminder of the commodity's behavior, and the extractive economy presented a less complicated picture than the abstract, financialized markets of the Global North. But such knowledge was also a requirement for survival. If precautionary measures were not taken, inflation could destroy a family's savings and erode the gains made over years of work. Workers could lose everything in rapid currency devaluations, and so they sought to protect earnings by investing in durable goods and hard currencies which held their value. Venezuela's unpredictable monetary policy, which saw the money supply adjusted in accordance with fluctuations in global markets, put workers at the mercy of external forces and the whims of officials.

This dependent position, along with the fact that Florentino's products were not sold on the world market but destined for state food-security programs and domestic consumption, led workers to make incisive critiques of the enterprise and state bureaucracies. This devil discourse was not what I would call "a cult of material improvement," but it was used to critique specific patterns of capital circulation and the frictions arising from them. In this sense, although the devil discourse was far less ritualized than what anthropologists have observed in other Latin-American contexts, the symbol still mediated the tensions of economic transition. The devil symbol could be attached to a variety of objects, including managers, the occult powers of oil, or the exertion of work itself. One of the office workers, frustrated with her schedule and long hours, circulated a short essay among her colleagues asserting that fatigue and time away from family were "the pathways" the devil used to enter into human relations. The essay argued long work hours led to disrespect for family life as well as infidelity in marriages. The worker used this essay to give voice to feelings of weariness and disillusion, but the critique lacked a systematic character. The worker had obtained the essay from the Internet, and it critiqued only labor's intensity, not its specific form. This "devil talk" mattered, but it was diffuse, I suspect, because it mediated relations in which workers did not always participate. Moreover, such critiques could obscure as much as they revealed since it was through acts of resistance invoking the devil that workers acceded to the existing configuration of sovereign power and accepted the custodians of the petrostate as legitimate actors to whom one should petition for redress of grievances.

The Resource Curse as National-Popular Hegemony

In his writings on culture and power, Raymond Williams (1977) argues that hegemonic discourses serve to organize political consent by offering accounts for material relationships both *within* and *beyond* the direct experience of social actors.[17] Any hegemonic discourse worthy of the name must be able to incorporate "dissonant meanings" produced at "the boundaries of social control" by channeling subaltern consciousness into "the dominant modes of ideology." One of the ways in which this is achieved is by equating essentially unlike things through integration of subaltern "cultural emphases" into elite narratives of statecraft. In Venezuela, political leaders used the devil to describe the negative effects of the rentier economy, including rapid swings in the value of currency and crushing external debt. But the devil was also used by average Venezuelans to excoriate corruption by elites with whom they did not interact, or whose graft was concealed by bureaucratic opacity.

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[17] "The reality of cultural process must always include the efforts and contributions of those who are in one way or another outside or at the edge of the terms of the specific hegemony" (Williams 1977: 113).

Florentino workers could only speculate on what was occurring in the enterprise head office, and they did not enjoy the same leverage as Venezuela's oil workers. Thus, it was more difficult to enforce their rights by simply withdrawing labor power. Yet, they also experienced the positive and negative effects of oil rent circulation, and as such, were compelled to respond to the field of force it shaped. Workers' social awareness came from not just the labor process but also pressure on household reproduction and the fetishistic images attached to the commodity whose profits funded their workspace. The constant rearticulation of elite and popular discourses using the devil symbol led to critiques by workers that overlapped with, but also diverged from, those of political leaders. A few of these critiques were meant quite literally.[18]

In one version of the discourse, oil was the devil's work, and Venezuelans were collectively responsible for society's failings. Defects such as "greed" or "lust for power" were behind the pursuit of a developmental path which led to the loss of economic sovereignty and stability. Faulting their own lack of values for a wave of crime and social decay, workers asked if they were recipients of divine retribution for dealing in the devil's excrement. Notions of "sin" were readily invoked in this context, and it was easy for workers to make satanic associations when sulfur rose from the ground below them. It was also easy to wonder if they were "cursed" when oil offered no serious prospect for stable, long-term development and repeated attempts at "sowing" this "bitter money" (Akin and Robbins 1999) failed to yield lasting results.[19]

These theories were not "unreasonable" in the most literal sense of the word. But alone, they did not perform the work of coalescing a subject capable of vanquishing Venezuela's enemy—after all, a purely metaphysical evil can never truly be defeated. By contrast, Venezuela's left-populist leaders tried to resituate these narratives of moral failure in another register. In official discourse, Venezuela was a virtuous nation which had lost its way when certain segments of society led it astray. Charging an "oligarchy," rooted in the petroleum industry, with sapping the nation's strength, Chavistas reworked the story of *Florentino y el Diablo* into a critique of the loss of work ethic and the productivity of land and labor. This was certainly a radical discourse, but it also had its limits.

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[18] In Venezuela, proletarianization had a longer, more uneven history than contexts where diabolical symbols emerged amid a radical break with non-capitalist relations (e.g., Taussig 1980).

[19] Bloch and Parry (1989) argue money has no intrinsic properties and that scholars have often fetishized currencies based on Western-capitalist cultural assumptions. Akin and Robbins (1999) respond to this critique by suggesting money does have at least some distinct properties, leading to significant cross-cultural and historical patterns with regard to its uses, impacts, and meanings. Recognition of these patterns and a search for their origins is not tantamount to vulgar economic determinism or Occidentalism. Indeed, a poignant critique of such fetishistic arguments appears in their writing—which like my critique of the resource curse—opposes the idea that money has *intrinsically destructive* properties apart from the social relations in which it is embedded. Money is distinct from other objects of exchange, but too much focus on the object, abstracted from its social context, results in loss of the specificity of its patterns of production and circulation. Marxists and Polanyians have long noted the distinction between "non-commodified" and "commodified" forms of money, with the latter tending to spawn more strident critiques of alchemy and immoral transactions that "will not yield."

Scores of intellectuals writing on natural resources have deployed the concept of the resource curse to account for the negative effects of extractive economies and their alleged tendency to promote graft, corruption, and social decay. In this literature, fossil fuels have been faulted for everything from war to poverty to capitalism itself (e.g., Mitchell 2011; Collier 2008; Altvater 2007; Huber 2009; Renner 2006). This literature has also suggested that the history of natural resources can be used to trace the evolution of modern political systems and that the negative impacts of "excess" resource income include a "democracy deficit," (Ross 1999), declines in real economic growth (Sachs and Warner 1995), and kleptocracies whose sole objective is to enrich themselves while preserving power through gross spending on military repression (Klare 2001). Although these phenomena are certainly recognizable features of the Venezuelan state, they are not directly attributable to oil or an "excess" of its revenue. Coronil (1997) stresses that theories of the "resource curse" rarely consider that the "rentier effect" is a symptom of *specific uses* of oil revenue, not unearned income (see also Watts 2004).

The inability of oil-exporters to use resource wealth to develop their own societies is not an "inexorable dynamic" but a social process, which even strident critics can reproduce (Coronil 1997: 42). Thus, writers who rely on the concept of the "resource curse" engage in a form of commodity fetishism that ignores already weak state sovereignty and tacitly endorses the idea that natural resources have intrinsic properties which induce decisions by political leaders. In their own way, scholars have "succumbed to the devil" by confusing oil with the social conditions under which it is extracted and the methods of disposing of its gains. Venezuelan leaders likewise deployed a local version of "the curse," when they suggested oil wealth was "unearthed," when in fact its value is constituted through processes of calculation, measurement, and extraction (Labban 2010; Baptista and Mommer 1986)—processes over which Venezuelans did not have complete control.

Following conventional readings of Venezuelan history (Tinker-Salas 2009; Coronil 1997: 67–117), Chavista discourse correlated the rise of oil with the decline of national agriculture and other sectors of the economy, using an image drawn from popular culture. In its most fetishistic versions, the narrative centered on the resource itself, while in others, it focused on the caste that controlled its revenue. In both cases, however, the narrative failed to account for the genesis of weak state sovereignty, which preceded the rise of oil, and value-realization in the hands of foreign corporations. It was not oil extraction *per se* that created dependency but rather a state system whose revenue policy privileged higher rates of return over labor productivity and industries which relied heavily on imported inputs (DiJohn 2009). This structure of growth was part of the long process of Venezuela's subordinate integration into the world capitalist market, which began with coffee in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Roseberry 1985, Yarrington 1997). Perhaps most crucially, this narrative also failed to call attention to the logics of state enterprises and their ties with petrodollars.

This local version of the resource curse portrayed state enterprises as decoupled from global energy markets when in reality they were anything but. Florentino was a space where exploitation was to be transcended in favor of a more just, egalitarian society. But the farm replicated central facets of capitalism, including the division between mental and manual labor, replacement of variable capital in wages with constant capital in machinery, and fiscal autonomy guided by profit-seeking. A belief in the harmful effects of oil and its link with diabolical forces indicated a critical awareness of the perils of a mono-export economy and the need to transcend it. But even at its most coherent, this narrative did not subject capitalist productive relations to scrutiny. Rather than a true theory of underdevelopment, the "resource curse" was a form of cultural-political mediation involved in its *social reproduction.* It was not an historicized account of peripheral capitalism but a form of fetishism which obscured the path out of export-dependency.

As an expression of populist logic, Chavista critiques of resource extraction reconciled workers with the petrostate via tropes which mystified its operation. The image of a unified center of power, endowed with exceptional wealth, could have a variety of signifiers attached to it. The petrostate could be portrayed as a munificent God which bestowed gifts on the *populus* or a malevolent devil to be vanquished by a hero like Chávez or Florentino. But neither image fully de-fetishized its object, and the latter discourse tended to imply the petrostate could be purified, rather than transcended. Insofar as the Bolivarian Revolution was directed from above, it constituted a passive revolution, which sought not to overturn the petrostate, but to lay hold of the ready-made state apparatus and wield it for its own purposes. *Demonization* of the petrostate was the other side of the coin of its *deification* and a step along the road to its "recapture." A political coalition in favor of a diversified economy and the redirection of flows of extractive wealth could be forged with this critique, but its scope was restricted to these ends.

Conclusion

In this article, I render legible voices from the global periphery, not least of which the voice that called George W. Bush, "the devil," but I would stop short of suggesting I have "recovered" them (cf. Clifford and Marcus 1983; Abu-Lughod 1993). Instead, I perform work akin to what Coronil (1997) calls "translation," rendering the cultural particularity of devil images in Venezuela less strange or "exotic" to observers who are not part of this shared system of reference (cf. Chakrabarty 2000). This tack brought me into conflict with an occidental modernity, which imagines the North/West as the home of civilization and progress. However, my critique is not the type of broadside on science or rationality that the stance of radical relativism implies (Lukács 2021 [1952]; compare Visweswaran 1994; 2010).[20] Rather, the object of my critique is an imperial discourse that reproduces itself through constitutive exclusions and the denial of its own irrational impulses, or, to put it another way, that "ignores the devil in its own house."

The clash of George W. Bush and Hugo Chávez at the United Nations was not an example of rational liberalism facing off against obscurantist populism, as the U.S. media liked to portray it. It was, at best, an example of what some scholars have called "the clash of fundamentalisms" (Ali 2003; Achar 2006). But even this appraisal is dubious in light of Chávez's suggestion that Bush's speech could have been "evaluated by a psychiatrist" in his own invocation of the discourse of madness, with a clinical, scientific twist. Both leaders deployed elements of modernist discourse to burnish their credentials as representatives of historically progressive forces, and both deployed motifs drawn from Christian theology to invoke divine authority for their respective policies. Yet despite the obvious parallels, the U.S. media denied any similarity between the non-secular aspects of Bush's "crusade" in the Middle East and Chávez's references to "the devil," and in this regard, they were by far the worst offenders.

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[20] Although I tend to regard "labor" as the means by which "different cultures can collaborate," as opposed to her more ethereal vision of "shared imaginaries and dispositions," I firmly agree with Visweswaran's assertion that "the new culturalism" has reinforced ethno-racial essentialisms and prevented emergence of other collectivities.

From the perspective of U.S. corporate media, the equation of Bush with the devil was a mystery, and the grievances of Venezuela as an oil nation were far off stage. But when considering Venezuela's historical political economy, the reference made perfect sense. The devil was part of a populist discourse directed at coalescing a political subject capable of displacing rentier elites who had ruled Venezuela for more than fifty years, while constructing an economy that could achieve "true" sovereignty. This critique of oligarchy brought together diverse societal interests and worldviews, and its vividness derived from its dealing with real aspects of life in a petrostate. Yet despite the critique's persuasiveness, it lacked the capacity to confront all the forces that kept workers like Sergio in subalternity.

In Venezuela, social actors were able to make sense of the occult features of the petroleum economy using a shared cultural system. But their penetrating insights were limited by the fetishizing discourses they used to interpret it (Willis 1977). Devil discourse was not the only way subalterns critiqued the petrostate or the socialist project in Venezuela, but it was one pervasive idiom, which targeted essential features of their exploitation, even as it occluded others. By attaching the devil symbol to oil—the nexus of their woes—Venezuelans were able to criticize a caste of elites linked to "ill-gotten" gains and a society whose profits came "without labor." But this was not a critique that could account for genesis of Venezuela's fragile state sovereignty, or the alienation of wage labor in state enterprises. The critique accounted for frictions tied to the circulation of capital and the mediating role of the state bureaucracy. But it fell short of a critique of production. It could characterize the former as evil and castigate the "guilty parties," but it did not condemn the devilish logics arising from "sowing oil." Sergio's critique targeted *the terms of labor*, not wage labor *itself*.

Although clever and certainly adequate for his purposes, Sergio's discourse did not critique the sale of his labor power and instead directed his gaze outward toward a political leader who could secure its agreed-upon value. This was likely due to the fact that most Florentino workers were not recently proletarianized and had been separated from land for several generations. These workers had no agrarian "moral economy" to look back on (cf. Scott 1977), and any notion of right to a "just share" was grounded in oil and a sense of entitlement to a portion of its proceeds (Roseberry 1989). Labor in Florentino was also far less exploitative than in many other Latin-American settings. Workers were not trapped in the mines of Bolivia or Colombia's sugarcane plantations, and unlike the context studied by Nash (1993[1979]), capital was moving *into* agriculture thanks to the redirection of extractive flows by Venezuela's government. Workers were relatively free to switch jobs, and Florentino offered better labor conditions than did most rural employers. Efforts to impose stricter budgetary discipline at the expense of workers' wages and benefits, meanwhile, were also met with stubborn resistance. Yet, this relative privilege was not the greatest impediment to the type of leverage and consciousness that could have allowed workers to transcend the subaltern condition.

As Paul Willis (1977: 175) notes, "…cultural penetrations are repressed, disorganized, and prevented from reaching their full potential, or a political articulation, by deep, basic, and disorienting divisions." The ruling party's support for a modernization project built on technical expertise meant it was difficult to challenge inequalities embedded in the division of labor or the forms of mediation that reproduced it. The failure of the ruling party to address its own complicity with these hierarchies, combined with reluctance to depart from populist interpellations like "the people" as its mobilization strategy, meant these tensions were largely hidden or suppressed. The occlusion of such contradictions, along with continued reliance on fossil-fuel exports, prevented workers from seizing control of the labor process and encouraged officials to contain struggles at the point of production to prevent them from maturing. It is these divisions that the Bolivarian Revolution has proven spectacularly incapable of overcoming, and which suggest that the specters of petro-populism will likely haunt Venezuela for many years to come.[21]

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[21] Taking a cue from his predecessor's stance of rhetorical hostility toward the United States, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro called President Barack Obama, "The Grand Chief of Devils" and faulted "the empire" for Chávez's death. The reverence reserved for Chávezhas not been so easily transferred to new leadership, however.

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