

The Enduring Legacy: Oil, Culture, and Society in Venezuela. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009. 344pp., ISBN 082234419X

In this thoroughly researched history of the oil industry in twentieth century Venezuela, Miguel Tinker Salas treats oil not only as an object of historical analysis but as a subject that exerts influence on ideological formations. Salas's book makes two conceptual interventions as it relates the history of oil in Venezuela. First, Salas argues that the oil industry, which has typically been studied for its economic ramifications, actually shaped culture, social norms, and national consciousness in Venezuela. Second, he provides critical evidence to undermine the narrative of oil, especially foreign oil companies, as an agent of modernization for a formerly primitive country. In order to support this point, he begins his historical sketch with a survey of Venezuelan geography, politics, and society during the nineteenth century and then demonstrates that traditions rooted in this period did not vanish with the transformations wrought by the oil industry, but rather converged with the cultural norms imported by foreign corporations and persisted into the twentieth century. Most of the Venezuelan population, constituting the poorer segments, were not drastically affected in their everyday lives by the discovery of oil. Moreover, Salas asserts, the idea that private companies with foreign interests functioned to modernize Venezuela is a pernicious fiction that "masks" the exploitive politics of extraction by depicting the oil corporations as benevolent allies of Venezuelan national interests (238).

Salas fleshes out these arguments over the course of seven chapters, ending with a conclusion that synthesizes the extensive details into a cohesive big picture. The chapters follow a chronological trajectory, but a cluster of thematic concerns is threaded throughout the history and provides focus for what could otherwise become a centrifugal proliferation of data. Among these themes are race relations, class and demographic displacements, family life and the role of women in oil camps, and the conflation of private companies and civic infrastructure. Writing against the notion of Venezuela as racially democratic, Salas describes the recreation of an anti-black racial hierarchy in the stratification of labor and administration in the oil companies. He explores the ways in which the oil industry "reinforced rather than lessened existing racial practices" (241). In terms of class dynamics, the book examines the displacement of an agrarian population by an industrial labor force drawn to previously rural areas where oil was discovered. It also describes the process by which U. S. American and British professionals gradually superseded the German and Venezuelan merchant elite as oil companies compromised the stronghold of the coffee economy. Salas provides detailed analyses of the residential camps formed and maintained by the oil corporations, tracing the transformations that camp life underwent as the companies began attracting married laborers rather than single men. Here, he focuses on the role that women played in disseminating Western cultural norms. Finally, the imbrication of state and privately-owned industry becomes a major problematic, as Salas argues that, "faced with little or no infrastructure and a relatively weak state," the oil companies "simply filled an important void" by providing schooling, paving roads, and overseeing other services that would eventually be taken up by the political state (247). This proactive stance apparently added to the symbolic fusion of the oil companies and the national identity of Venezuela as a modern state.

What makes Salas's work particularly interesting is that it tells the stories of people often omitted from the macronarrative of big oil and Venezuelan politics including, for example, the history of Bari resistance to territorial encroachment by oil drillers. An indigenous group living in the unmapped territory between Venezuela and Colombia, the Bari were officially considered

an “uncivilized” group because they retained autonomy from the Venezuelan government (32-33). During the 1920’s, the interests of oil companies merged with the national imperative to integrate Venezuela’s territory and define its boundaries, and both oil crews and government committees sought to pacify the Bari people with gifts and were met with hostility. Salas juxtaposes stories of the Bari’s attacks with violent propaganda from English-language newspapers, including a suggestion by the *Tropical Sun* that the Bari be gassed. In this way, he emphasizes the antagonism between indigenous societies and the national and corporate forces operating in collusion. Salas also pays close critical attention to the historical experiences of prostitutes that worked in Maracaibo, a city that grew overcrowded during the early phase of oil extraction. With the influx of oil laborers came a noticeable expansion of the sex trade in Maracaibo, which led to increased police involvement in the regulation of prostitutes. In 1930, female sex workers were compelled to carry health cards and to report their “whereabouts” to official institutes every time they changed location (66). In his consideration of the Bari resistance and the rigid policing of sex laborers, Salas illuminates the effects of the oil industry on segments of Venezuela’s population who might otherwise remain invisible in the historical record.

In relating the conditions of life for oil laborers, Salas often provides observations from foreigners who visited or immigrated to Venezuela. He provides quotes demonstrating the condescending language with which English and U. S. American travelers depicted the so-called primitive conditions of life in Venezuela. While these passages do much to illustrate the biased perspectives of those who advocated the extraction of resources from Venezuela, they also point to the lack of source material containing the voices of indigenous or local populations. Though Salas does not ameliorate this lack, he effectively illuminates it. He draws on newspapers, magazines, and business and industry publications from eleven archives in places ranging from Zulia, Venezuela to London, England. This use of primary sources enables Salas to construct a historical narrative that takes into account the varied and idiosyncratic experiences of individuals.

The Enduring Legacy is of interest to historians of Venezuela, to scholars interested in economics of extraction, and to anyone considering the intersection of economic practices and culture. Salas presents the fascinating idea that, as people reinterpret the symbolic meaning of a commodity, they experience a concurrent change in politics. He writes in his conclusion: “Though the economy and the government continue to rely exceedingly on the oil industry, the reality is that in contemporary Venezuela oil no longer functions as an irrational symbol of identity” (250). The rerouting of oil’s signifying capacity away from paternalistic narratives of modernization through foreign intervention is essential, Salas shows, in order for Venezuelans to outgrow the restrictions of cultural and economic imperialism. In this sense, Salas’s book takes up the legacy of Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* but focuses on a specific time and place, so that it carries all the disillusioning force of Said’s work without reiterating the generalizations of its schema. It is a valuable contribution to the historical study of Venezuelan national identity.

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