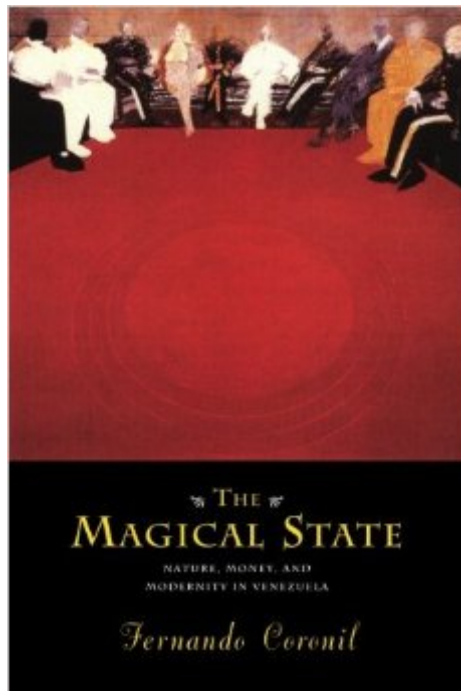# The Magical State: Nature, Money, And Modernity In Venezuela

Synopsis

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

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

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

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

In his introduction to The Magical State, Coronil writes: "As an oil nation, Venezuela was seen as having two bodies, a politcal body made up of its citizens and a natural body made up of its rich subsoil." Coronil's subject is how the state interacted with these two bodies. Abundant oil money, he argues, raised the ambitions of the state and the expectations of the people to an unrealistic extreme. Although excessive cashflow could not be spent efficiently in an underdeveloped country like Venezuela, pretending to do so was the government's sole claim to legitimacy; thus a charade of progress and benevolence pervaded the political culture of an export-driven, dependent economy.Coronil's ideas are fascinating, and Part I alone (of four) makes this book worth reading. Unfortunately, Coronil does not bring his ideas home persuasively. Instead his book slowly degenerates into deconstructed historical anecdotes and glimpses of bitter subjectivity: reminders of his own experience with the government of Venezuela. Coronil's book casts an intriguing theoretical perspective on more conventional, more competent histories of Venezuela by scholars like Judith Ewell or John Lombardi. Read them first. The Magical State is for those who are comfortable with the historical framework and are ready to read critically--caveat lector.

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