

## Book Review

– *Channelling the State: Community Media and Popular Politics in Venezuela*, by Naomi Schiller, Duke University Press, 2018

As the ongoing social, economic and political crisis in Venezuela continues to unravel, there is an urgent need for work that deepens our understanding of the Bolivarian era and its myriad contradictions. *Channelling the State* by Naomi Schiller is a rich and compelling text that meets this need head on and provides a welcome contribution to the growing body of ethnographic work on Venezuela in this tumultuous period. Focusing on barrio-based television station Catia TVe, Schiller documents the experiences of working-class community media producers as they attempt to construct new forms of popular media amid the ascendancy of the late president Hugo Chávez and his Bolivarian Revolution. Focusing on how pro-government community media producers began to receive funding and training from the *chavista* state, Schiller draws conceptually on anthropological approaches to the state and argues against a sharp dichotomy between state and civil society. Instead, she asserts that state formation “is an ever-unfolding result of daily power-laden interactions between poor and elite social actors who jointly create the state through practices that are local, regional, and global” (p. 5). Her ethnography details these dynamics as they are experienced, understood and enacted by her informants.

Schiller begins by detailing the history of televised broadcasting in Venezuela. She shows how its emergence in the 1950s developed in tandem with the country’s growing oil economy and its close cultural, economic and political ties with the United States. In this period, Venezuela’s television networks were dominated by imported US sitcoms, films and sports, reflecting the strong cultural influence that North American consumer capitalism was already having on Venezuelan society. As Schiller notes, however, this approach wasn’t without its critics, and during the 1960s and 1970s there was a continent-wide drive to prioritize democratic access to information over commercial interests (p. 34-36). Although these nationalist cultural movements ultimately proved unable to reform Venezuela’s media landscape, they nonetheless laid key ideological foundations that would later be picked up and reworked by Schiller’s interlocutors at Catia TVe.

In the second chapter, Schiller examines many of the complex (and often contradictory) ways in which community media producers at Catia TVe “eroded boundaries between the state and society, and, on the other hand, reaffirmed the distinction between these realms” (p. 64). She describes, for example, how Carlos, Catia TVe’s founder, acts as a vital mediator between pro-government state broadcaster ViVe TV and a collection of community media producers who had been brought in to help ViVe cover the 2006 presidential election. Amid fears that coverage of any problems at polling stations might be manipulated by Chávez’s opponents, Carlos convinces his community media comrades that any issues should be reported to the government, but not necessarily screened (p. 82). Because of his status as a respected grassroots activist, Carlos is able to deftly manage a complex exchange in which issues of state power, class, revolutionary strategy and press freedom are all in play. Rather than view such encounters as a top-down imposition of state power, Schiller instead demonstrates that they constitute every day and localised processes of state formation, albeit in ways that are “disorderly, ad hoc, last minute, and very much a product of human design” (p. 84).

This refusal to flatten out complex realities is a great strength of *Channeling the State*. Indeed, one of the joys of this book is that Schiller presents her ethnography in great detail without needing to over-theorise or over-cite the work of others. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 – focusing on class, the practice of *denuncias* and gender respectively – offer rich and textured accounts of the ways in which her respondents navigate an array of new experiences as they juggle complex roles as both community activists and state actors. One account that stands out describes a series of workshops held between ViVe TV and Schiller’s friends at Catia TVe. Describing the effort to construct cultural forms that are “authentic” representations of “Venezuelan culture”, Schiller shows how essentialist critiques of imported popular culture such as *telenovelas* or reggaeton work to denigrate working-class *barrio* residents, who are assumed to lack critical capacities because they enjoy such cultural forms. As Schiller points out, such views – which emanate largely from middle-class professionals – overlook the fact that “oppressed peoples have long adopted, modified, and blended different traditions and influences, generally not in conditions of their own choosing” (p. 111). Her perceptive and engaging ethnography highlights numerous instances in which her respondents resist and negotiate such encounters with an array of different strategies. Similar dynamics are evident in Schiller’s attention to the experiences of working-class women involved in Catia TVe, where she shows how a formal discourse of equality often masks an array of everyday instances in which women are silenced or excluded from being equal participants in media production. Schiller carefully shows how these gendered power dynamics are contested by respondents such as Ana, albeit in ways that are subtle and strategic. Such complex negotiations are, Schiller asserts, the very stuff of

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contested state formation: “Male supremacy did not emanate from above – from the masculinist vertical structures of the state – but was instead created through practices and interactions between differentially situated actors involving in state making” (p. 189).

Schiller closes the book by considering the liberal view that press freedom can only be guaranteed by a clear separation between state and civil society. She contends that for her interlocutors, such a clean separation was neither possible nor desirable. In some instances, such as discussions around financial autonomy, Catia TVe producers do seek out greater independence from the state in order to protect the integrity of their content. But in others, they adamantly reject what they regard as the imposition of classed notions of press freedom on their work. Schiller argues that decontextualized liberal understandings overlook the fact that *barrio* residents were marginalised in myriad ways by Venezuela’s pre-Chávez democracy, which failed to give political and economic rights equal weighting to liberal values such as freedom of speech (p. 239). For Catia TVe’s producers, the defence of these rights only became possible by engaging with the state as it opened up under Chávez’s leadership.

In sum, this is a rich, timely and compelling piece of work that contributes significantly to debates about the state, press freedom, community media, class, gender and urban social movements. It will be of great value both to those interested specifically in Venezuela and those concerned with these themes in broader terms.

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