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The Silence and the Scorpion: The Coup Against Chávez and the Making of Modern Venezuela (review)

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REVIEWS

The Silence and the Scorpion: The Coup Against Chávez and the Making of Modern Venezuela. By Brian A. Nelson. New York: Nation Books, 2009. Pp. xv, 355. Illustrations. Maps. Appendix. Glossary. Notes. Index. \$26.95 cloth.

Brian Nelson first went to Venezuela in 1989 as a high school exchange student. In 2002, with his MFA degree in hand, he began this project in Caracas under the aegis of a Fulbright Award in creative writing. He classifies his book as a work of “narrative nonfiction and investigative reporting” (p. 296) and focuses on the tragedy of those who died or were wounded during the events surrounding the golpe against President Hugo Chávez in April 2002. Nelson succeeds admirably in presenting a gripping narrative, but his low standards in investigative reporting make the book extremely one-sided and unreliable.

It is difficult to give an objective account of the events that Nelson describes. On April 11, 2002, a huge march, ostensibly peaceful, diverged from its authorized route and surged toward Miraflores, the presidential palace, with the avowed goal of ousting President Hugo Chávez. Near Miraflores, the marchers encountered the Metropolitan Police, the National Guard, and Chávez supporters. The Metropolitan Police and the National Guard should have maintained order and protected the palace, but many among them sympathized with the opposition. Tear gas was launched, rocks were thrown, shots were fired, many were wounded, and 19 people were killed, both chavistas and opponents. In the ensuing chaos, army commanders disobeyed Chávez’s order to move into the streets, forcibly took him to an undisclosed location, and tried to get him to resign. On April 12, businessman Pedro Carmona assumed the presidency, dismissed the National Assembly and the Supreme Court, abolished the Constitution, and appointed a cabinet that included none of the supporting military officers. No significant objections arose when loyal officers returned Chávez to power on April 13. Venezuelans continue to believe that the violence was part of a larger plot. Chavistas claim that the opposition fired the shots in order to provoke outrage that would allow a planned coup to take place. The opposition charges that Chávez’s supporters shot into the crowd, while blaming the opposition, to create a pretext for Chávez to clamp down more decisively on his enemies.

Nelson unequivocally supports the opposition story and presents little evidence from the Chávez side. He concludes that chavista supporters fired the shots; that Chávez subsequently blocked investigation into the events; and, that Chávez’s generals removed him because they did not want to turn the army on the people, and because they deplored his effort to “Cubanize” the country. No coup conspiracy existed. Carmona simply took

advantage of an opportunity, but his overreaching allowed the Chávez restoration. During the three day ordeal, Chávez himself was indecisive, incoherent, and tearful; he considered suicide.

In addition to press accounts and media footage, Nelson interviewed 19 people with first-hand knowledge of the march or military discussions. Although he interviewed chavistas, Nelson depends most heavily on opposition marchers, journalists (almost universally hostile to Chávez), and military officers who subsequently broke with Chávez or were dismissed by him. The author tries to resolve minor discrepancies in the interviews conducted between 2003 and 2007, but he overlooks the larger problem that most participants on both sides wanted to justify themselves and demonize the opposition. Moreover, by implicitly endorsing the opposition's goal of removing a popularly elected president by force if necessary, Nelson fails in his avowed goal of "balancing" the chapters so that "the reader can see the coup from multiple perspectives simultaneously" (p. x).

Nelson's narrative method supports the picture he wishes to present. He begins with a sympathetic description of individuals who took part in the opposition march. Some brought their families to enjoy the carnival atmosphere, while more committed opponents intended for the demonstration to force Chávez out. None are portrayed as drunk, disorderly, carrying weapons, or violent, although Nelson does claim that the marchers came from all classes, including "poor people who smelled bad" (p. 108). The reader thus is invited to join the good-hearted marchers rather than to side with the elected government. Second, Nelson offers pithy physical descriptions of his characters, making the opposition figures especially appealing. The first two we meet are Malvina, "a very tall architect with short blond hair" (p. 12), and her boyfriend, a "stout, barrel-chested man with light skin and a kind face" (p. 13). Malvina was shot in the neck and head, although she eventually recovered. Another young boy who was shot was "strong and good-looking, with dark eyes and a head of thick black hair" (p. 30). Nelson describes these wounds in graphic and bloody detail, as if the extended descriptions could clarify the truth. Some chavistas receive less generous descriptions. A general had "a disappointing chin between heavy, swollen cheeks" (p. 127), and "a fat woman with a baseball cap" (p. 217) shouted at the camera.

Nelson frequently cites, with no substantiation, the opposition's rumors and suspicions. For example, "[General] Vásquez Velasco suspected that Chávez wanted the march to reach Miraflores; that he wanted to teach the opposition a lesson" (p. 128). And "[p]ublic opinion in the opposition" believed that a military policeman was jailed after the coup "because he was one of the few people to see Chávez cry" (p. 271). Nelson offers very few rumors that reveal chavista fears and suspicions. The author also adds his own (sometimes questionable) speculations. Two of the dead must have been killed by the National Guard, he concludes, because the bullets found in the bodies "could only have been fired" (p. 105) by the Belgian FAL assault rifle, used "exclusively" (p. 115) by the National Guard. He assumes that the shooter could only have been a Chávez ally, and he does not acknowledge that in crime-ridden Caracas, it probably was not too difficult for civilians or criminals to secure military arms. Nelson is credulous with opposition sources, but rejects pro-Chávez sources as inherently unreliable. He asserts (without giving any evidence) that the

Irish filmmakers who made *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* (2002) received Chávez's cooperation by promising to portray him positively. "This agreement—although contrary to responsible documentary filmmaking—is immediately apparent from the film's unabashed pro-Chávez stance" (p. 337). Nelson interviewed spokespersons from two organizations that have attempted to assist the victims of the events of April 11: the government-funded ASOVIC (Asociación Nacional de Víctimas del Golpe de Estado 11, 12, 13, 14 de Abril) and the independent organization VIVE (Víctimas Venezolanas de la Violencia Política). The author accepts the integrity of VIVE spokespersons without question, but writes that those associated with ASOVIC had a conflict of interest in talking about the events because they held government jobs.

Nelson's book is an engaging read that conveys much of the chaos, uncertainty, and horror of those three days in April. His conclusions may be valid, but his lack of evenhandedness undermines the credibility of the book.

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ETHNOHISTORY & INDIGENOUS POLITICS

The Sun God and the Savior: The Christianization of the Nahua and Totonac in the Sierra Norte de Puebla, Mexico. By Guy Stresser-Péan. Foreword by Alfredo López Austin. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2009. Pp. xxix, 664. Foreword. Bibliography. Index. Maps. Illustrations. DVD. \$75.00 cloth.

Guy Stresser-Péan's erudite compilation of contemporary Nahua and Totonac beliefs resulted from fieldwork carried out in the 1980s and 1990s, but summarizes the knowledge and experience of an ethnographer whose work in Mexico commenced in the 1930s. He describes the book's core region of study as an area covering part of the municipalities of Huauchinango and Xicotepec, and the small municipalities of Naupan, Pahuatlán and Chila-Honey in the Sierra Norte de Puebla, as well as part of the municipalities of Acaxochitlán and Tenango de Doria in the state of Hidalgo. However, in various chapters his reflections expand beyond this area as he discusses the ethnography of neighboring regions, such as the southern part of the Sierra Norte, where the Nahuatl dialect known as Olmeca-Mexicano is spoken, and the Totonac villages to the north of the Pahuatlán river that were studied by Alain Ichon. Likewise, the title only mentions the Nahua and Totonac, but his discussion often includes the Otomí and sometimes the Tepehua.

Despite its subtitle, the main purpose of the book is not so much an analysis of christianization but a detailed description, and a careful and measured interpretation, of the survival of pre-Hispanic beliefs and traditions. They include those that have mixed with Christian beliefs, as well as those that have remained separate, but which do not stop communities from having deeply held Christian beliefs in other aspects of life. Stresser-Péan is clear to point out that he considers the indigenous groups studied to be sincerely