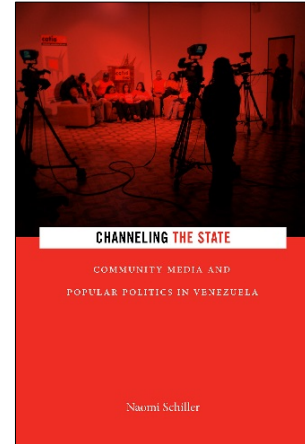


Naomi Schiller, **Channeling the State: Community Media and Popular Politics in Venezuela**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018, 296 pp., \$25.95 (paperback), \$99.95 (hardback).

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The question of what kind of media ecosystem would be ethical for Latin American states during the era of the pink tide (a broad term used to describe Chavismo-inspired governments and social movements that began in the 1990s and receded in the 2010s) is a subject of important scholarly inquiry, as it elicits a reconsideration of categories such as “state,” “public,” and “community.” Insofar as these populist regimes sought to facilitate a national-popular, thereby eclipsing state power with popular power, to do so they had to construct new media democracies in communication infrastructures that had been largely monopolized by the private sector. Very often their approaches were the prioritization of state and parastate media. Understandably, many would see these populist governments’ methods as “top-down,” inasmuch as they elevated state-brokered news over civil society- and market-based journalisms (Waisbord, 2013). The question then arises: What kind of media policy would have best served these regimes to correspond with their discourse of popular power and avoid accusations of paternalism and clientelism?

Naomi Schiller makes an important intervention in this debate in her work of media anthropology, **Channeling the State: Community Media and Popular Politics in Venezuela**. As she observes in the introduction,

Although the Chávez government embraced some of the formal mechanisms of liberal democracy—such as a strong emphasis on the constitution and regular elections—it challenged the basic liberal norm of the necessary autonomy of media and social movements from the state. (p. 2)

Using as her case the Caracas-based community broadcaster Catia Tve, she argues that barrio media makers, who hitherto had been subaltern actors, dabbled with state power as a maneuver to negotiate Chavismo’s contradictions, including the increasingly presidentialist politics of the regime that belied its rhetoric of “participatory democracy.”

Schiller maintains that through producing media and in turn encouraging their viewers to follow suit, these *comunicadores* became active agents, inasmuch as their practices emboldened them to participate in key policy debates, including the allocation of airwaves. Using as her method the theory of everyday state formation (Joseph & Nugent, 1994; Scott, 1998), and informed by years of fieldwork, Schiller analyzes these grassroots media producers’ dynamic interdependence with *oficialismo bolivariano*. Through class alliances, Catia Tve broadcasters, who hail from poor barrios of Caracas,

used their cultural agency to participate in this experiment in petro populism as it unfolded. Such an entry point is an original approach, as it de-reifies "the state" not as something to be seized or abolished, but to always-already be remade. Thus, Catia TVE's *comunicadores* advocated media production "as a process of political organizing, rather than a means to an end" (p. 46). There is a smattering of writings from such a Gramscian view where community media are seen as vehicles for quotidian state formation in Latin America (Fernandes, 2006; Talens, 2011), so this book will be of interest to global media and Latin American media scholars.

Schiller makes it clear in the introduction that she finished the book during the current humanitarian crisis plaguing Venezuela, where over 3 million citizens have fled. She notes that many of her Catia TVE informants are now suffering from the same everyday violence that most Venezuelans experience. Further reflection on how this catastrophe might affect her thesis of barrio media making as everyday state formation would have been welcome; however, Schiller is explicit that her study is a historical work, covering the period in which Hugo Chávez was alive.

In chapter 1, Schiller historicizes Catia TVE, arguing that it is not an anomaly, inasmuch as in the twentieth century diverse Venezuelan governments used public and private media opportunistically. That the statism of Chavista media policy is not a break from but a continuation of past media presidencies demonstrates that media in Venezuela have always been contested, cooptable spaces irrespective of who is in power. Schiller elegantly connects the roots of Catia TVE, which started broadcasting in 2001, to the community video collective movement, a phenomenon that grew out of 1990's postdictatorship Latin America.

In chapter 2, Schiller further builds on the argument she mounted in the introduction that barrio media activists took advantage of the blurry lines between "state" and "society" to embrace everyday statecraft in Bolivarian Venezuela. When expedient Catia TVE broadcasters embraced liberal notions of the state to legitimize themselves. Other times, they repudiated this fixed "society"-"state" division. Recounting the comments of one of her anonymized subjects, for whom the state is "permeable" and "processual," she writes, "Independence from the state was impossible when they were revolutionizing the state from within. He didn't see the state as the central agent of power (p. 68). Schiller uses as an example of Catia TVE's involvement in everyday statecraft its coverage of and involvement with a meeting to organize a communal council.

In chapter 3, Schiller analyzes Catia TVE's strategic class collaborations with middle-class media producers such as Blanca Eekhout, former director of the official state broadcaster ViVe TV. She looks at cross-class interactions that took place at a series of training workshops. The chapter becomes particularly interesting when she analyzes class tensions in conceptions of popular culture. In contrast to Schiller's interlocutors, Eekhout laments global media culture's destruction of "traditional Venezuelan culture" (p. 108). Schiller observes that these cultural traditions have never been pure but from the beginning have always been hybridized phenomena emerging from colonial relations. Such astute class analysis de-dichotomizes reductionist "bottom-up"/"top-down" conceptions of Bolivarian Venezuela's culture of the poor, revealing that how it is to be defined as contested space, inasmuch as it comprises this emergent everyday statecraft.

Chapter 4 critiques theories of populism, which are often deployed to qualify Chavismo's media policies (Waisbord, 2014). Given the late Chávez's paternalistic proclivities, which problematized the notion of "popular democracy," such approaches to his stewardship are understandable. Schiller, however, instead of focusing on how Chávez controlled the population, looks at how people from poor barrios channeled the state/Chávez by way of the televised *denuncia* (a Spanish term that refers to a denouncement or a demand). Catia Tve would frequently transmit denuncias of citizens, which consisted mostly of people's displeasure with government-led programs. Schiller uses this phenomenon to emphasize one of the ways in which popular classes avoided being coopted, here by taking to the airwaves to negotiate the centralized leadership of Chávez.

In chapter 5, Schiller analyzes the gender imbrications of everyday statecraft, arguing that despite their revolutionary rhetoric, Catia Tve broadcasters and their middle-class allies ultimately reproduced traditional patriarchal leadership structures. Schiller critiques preceding feminist literature on the Bolivarian Revolution, namely that its patriarchal tendencies are attributable to verticalism, arguing instead for a consideration of gendered power outside of this "state"–"non-state" binary. Insofar as in Gramscian theory the state and society are inextricably part of the same totality, it is important to realize that these sexist logics that constitute the state apparatus are invariably reinforced by social actors, and as Schiller's chapter makes clear, this is especially the case in Caracas' media landscape.

Chapter 6 considers issues of press freedom, which in the context of Bolivarian media have been the subject of much controversy. For Schiller, government regulation of media presupposes a clean decoupling of state and society, categories grounded in liberal philosophy that she has argued do not correlate with the contingencies of Bolivarian Venezuela. Her case here concerns Caracas' controversial 2007 nonrenewal of the popular terrestrial broadcaster Radio Caracas Televisión on the grounds that it had participated in the coup attempt against Chávez in 2002. Rather than seeing state regulation of broadcasting as a Damocles' sword, Schiller maintains it is another dynamic interface with the state, another opportunity to build everyday statecraft. For example, then, that closure was seen by Catia Tve's producers as a step forward in building a radical media world.

Schiller's book boldly unthinks commonsensical categories in the liberal episteme, namely "the state" and "society." Doing so casts the popular classes not as victims of Western imperialism or of Chavista hegemony, but as activated agents who debated in what kind of state would be made. It is an important entry in the emergent field of Chavismo media studies.

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