

Sujatha Fernandes, **Who Can Stop the Drums?: Urban Social Movements in Chávez's Venezuela**, USA, Duke University Press, 2010, 319 pp., \$84.95 (hardcover), \$23.95 (paperback).

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Building on the literature produced by scholars on the sociopolitics of Venezuela in the Chávez era, Sujatha Fernandes' ethnography of social movements in the urban shantytowns of Caracas, *Who Can Stop the Drums?: Urban Social Movements in Chávez's Venezuela*, is an examination of everyday life and politics as seen in accounts of community-based radio as well as through barrio assemblies and popular fiestas since the election of Hugo Chávez. The aims of the book are to present an alternative to existing scholarship on social movements in Venezuela by exploring alliances, conflicts and the mutual empowerment of state and society and to provide an understanding of the diverse histories and experiences of social movements under the Chávez government. In looking at the spheres of everyday life in barrios, the book demonstrates an understanding of the dimensions of urban popular politics and illuminates broader questions about the contemporary political landscape and changing sites of social struggle in the region. By emphasizing the role of grassroots movements in Venezuela before the election of Chávez, the effects that the shift in has had on the movements' ability to grow, and the complexities that activists face in their interactions with the state, Fernandes effectively argues that the gap in the current literature on Venezuela is one that must be filled with research that looks at the power of ordinary people.



Who Can Stop the Drums? would be of interest to those who care about civil society and the formation of social movement formation in Latin America. But because of its aim to provide an alternative to existing scholarship on Venezuelan politics, it offers only a brief political history of the state. As a result those using it as a resource for looking at the effects of democratic consolidation on interactions between civil society and the state should combine its insights with information from other sources about the general history of Venezuela leading to democratic transition and the election of Hugo Chávez. Researchers in development communication will also find elements of this book interesting, specifically as it looks at how different forms of communication—religious festivals, murals, and community radio—are used by urban social movements as forms of resistance and as ways of pushing forward their own thoughts, views and agendas for development.

The volume is split into three main parts, with each part moving from a larger, broader picture focusing on historical moments and social movements to a narrower perspective placing movements on a local level. The first is a general synthesis of the individual and collective histories of the barrios where the fieldwork for the book was conducted: La Vega, 23 de Enero and San Agustín. The section traces the timeline of social action in Venezuela's barrios from guerilla insurgency to the genesis of community-based social activism and cultural crisis, followed by an examination of the debt crisis and neoliberal reforms in

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the country, and finally to the current period, with the election of Chávez. In chapters 1 and 2, Fernandes presents a structural analysis of events along with the collective histories of the barrios, arguing that the specific history of each barrio has contributed deeply to the varying experience of political consciousness whose presence has become central to social life. The argument is then situated in the life history of Yajaira with a life narrative by a San Agustín black woman who shares insights into these events.

In part 2, the author examines sites where urban social movements are contesting the structures of power and exclusion in the Chávez era. This section is particularly interesting in its examination of the roles that media and communication play in acts of resistance. It examines the use of religious fiestas and music by those living in urban barrios to define their identity on their own terms and includes a fascinating examination of community art in the form of murals in the barrios of Caracas. In interviews with the artists, Fernandes' analysis suggests that such murals are a popular alternative to newspapers, a form of street journalism with brigades regularly painting over old murals and replacing them with new ones, thus creating a "dynamic forum for street dialogue" (p. 165). The book's analysis of these fiestas and murals illuminates how barrio groups are creating and sustaining new forms of communication as a way of contesting and defining their difference from an exclusionary Venezuelan civil society, which has been historically identified as middle-class. The flow from the first part of the book to the second is aided by the inclusion of an examination of historical factors that shape the festivals and the content of murals, which use the past as a reservoir of images and symbols. This section also contains one of Fernandes' most captivating contributions to the analysis of Venezuelan politics and social life, a discussion of community-based radio stations in the barrios and the contradictions in state rhetoric that are illuminated as media activists interact with the state.

Thanks to changes by the Chávez government to laws that allowed for: 1) the facilitation of the legal recognition of clandestine radio and television stations, 2) the promotion of the right of community radio stations to exist, and 3) an increase in the amount of funding allotted for community media. As a result, Venezuela has experienced a rapid expansion of community radio and other popular media. In the author's interviews with community media activists, she emphasizes the importance of media in the barrio. In her interviews, several barrio activists mention the media blackout engineered by the opposition during the coup in 2002, which briefly removed Chávez from office, as a reason why those involved in urban movements want control over communications. Reflecting on social mobilization, Fernandes also observes the importance of communications through alternative print media, clandestine radio stations, and text messages on cell phones in passing on information and allowing people to take to the streets in the massive demonstrations that were instrumental in restoring Chávez to power two days later.

A documentation of encounters between community radio stations and the state demonstrates the frustrations of barrio media activists in the face of the inherent contradictions of what Fernandes calls a "post-neoliberal hybrid state" (p. 19). Although the Chávez government has been seen as one that breaks from the neoliberal model of governance, the book demonstrates that there are structural pressures in Venezuela that cause it to remain subject to the internal and external constraints of global capital. What is most interesting about this analysis is the use of ethnographic data to document the successes and challenges that face community media activists. Interviews with them detail how the focus of community radio stations on local music and culture provides a positive alternative to the

representations of barrios encountered in mainstream media, which nearly always characterizes them as dangerous and full of crime and violence. Fernandes also points out how the promotion of community media by the government is contradictory in the face of its need to accede to neoliberal pressures, particularly because media within the country is subject to the regulations of the global market. This is clearly demonstrated through an account of how representatives from several community radio cooperatives entered the office of Conatel, a state regulatory body in charge of democratizing media, and occupied it as a response to the seizure of a transmitter from a community radio station and the arrest of its technical coordinator. During the occupation, functionaries from Conatel maintained that the agency had followed the protocol required when a station is discovered to be broadcasting illegally. The debate that ensued between community media activists and government functionaries underlines the stark difference between the rhetoric of a purportedly inclusive state and the reality of state functions. The language of the functionaries focused the discussion on the state's notion of law, the importance of procedure, and the use regulatory and procedural language as a way of controlling "unruly" media activists, while the activists framed their arguments in terms of community-based organization and struggle. Fernandes' documentation of this encounter underscores the contradictions within Chávez's state rhetoric with the clash of worldviews shown between the utilitarian, technocratic regulators on the one hand, and the local knowledge of community radio stations on the other.

In the final part of the book, Fernandes builds upon her discussion of community radio activists, muralists, and other barrio activists in examining how urban social movements have attempted to build sustainable structures of representation and accountability from the grass roots. The dynamics of social movements, especially those that include alliances between rural and urban movements, are examined in terms of gender and regional inequalities, paternalism and hierarchy and issues of internal democracy within movements are discussed. The book closes with broader comments about the contemporary political landscape of Venezuela compared to that of the rest of Latin America and with a discussion of the role of cities in the new politics in Venezuela under Chávez. Fernandes also offers some speculation on what a post-neoliberal future might look like.

Overall, this book provides a timely examination of the political landscape of Venezuela under Chávez in a unique way. Most of the analysis of Chávez's Venezuela has been focused on history, looking at the political processes that led to Chávez's election with little regard to the everyday experiences of the Venezuelan people. Fernandes fills this gap for students and researchers while providing insight on cultural politics in an urban context.