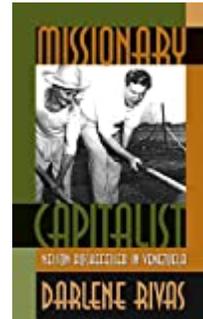




Darlene Rivas. *Missionary Capitalist: Nelson Rockefeller in Venezuela.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xiv + 290 pp. \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5350-4; \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2684-3.



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Financial Philanthropy, or the Perils of Doing Good

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Darlene Rivas has written a narrative account of Nelson Rockefeller's involvement with Venezuela from 1935, when he first became involved with Creole Petroleum (which operated there) until the mid-1950's, when Rockefeller began his elective political career. During this period Rockefeller visited Venezuela on numerous occasions, formed enduring relationships with important Venezuelan figures, and became a tireless advocate of Latin American concerns in Washington.

Rivas's narrative stays close to Rockefeller; it is primarily the story of his aspirations, experiences and frustrations over a twenty-year period. As such, it follows Rockefeller back and forth between his business enterprises, his private philanthropic initiatives in Venezuela, and his intermittent career as an adviser and appointed official within the Roosevelt, Truman and Eisenhower administrations. While focus can be an asset in a historian, this focus is so close that the historian often falls into first name familiarity with "Nelson," her subject.

The book is based upon a number of primary sources,

including the relevant U.S. government records, interviews with various participants, and most particularly the Rockefeller Archives at Tarrytown, New York. I have no idea if *Missionary Capitalist* began as a Ph.D. thesis, but it might have, given its length, its precise focus and its relentless empiricism.

The theme of this personal narrative is dual: on the one hand, it shows the difficult position of a self-consciously enlightened and philanthropic businessman, who was determined to conduct himself in an exemplary manner while still making a good return on his capital. On the other, it illustrates the contradictions of U.S. policy towards a region of secondary importance during the crises of World War Two and the early Cold War, contradictions that led to a yawning gap between rhetoric and action. The story ends in the mid-1950s, when Rockefeller entered active politics.

One of the merits of *Missionary Capitalist* is to show that Rockefeller's eponymous "Rockefeller Republicanism"—a type of centrist, difference-splitting, programmatically anti-ideological, managerial republicanism that eventually left Rockefeller isolated within his

party—was not a position opportunistically taken. The sense of noblesse oblige was strong in Rockefeller and his awareness that he was the grandson of the robber baron chief of that first and greatest of trusts, Standard Oil, was almost painful. At the same time, and as Rivas shows with some element of contradiction, Rockefeller wished to project himself as the embodiment of American success.

Rockefeller's sense of duty was an attitude that could be literally patronizing towards others and that ultimately did as little to win Rockefeller goodwill in Latin America as it did in middle America. The book's cover features a picture of a young Rockefeller, hoe in hand and a grin on his face, alongside a Venezuelan peasant farmer; one wonders what the Venezuelan peasant thought about this fresh-faced fellow in a white shirt. Two decades later, in the late 1960s, Rockefeller's Latin American enterprises were being firebombed, and his "fact-finding" ambassadorial tour of Latin America on behalf of Richard Nixon became an embarrassing failure. Venezuela, the country in which Rockefeller had invested so much time and hope, cancelled his visit.

Rockefeller's initial involvement in Venezuela came through Standard Oil's subsidiary in that country, Creole Petroleum. Creole was a purely extractive enterprise, pumping oil while attempting to remain in the good graces of the local authorities. The Mexican nationalization of 1938 put Rockefeller, who was already receptive to ideas of good corporate citizenship, and others on notice that a more enlightened attitude would be necessary in order to avoid a similar experience. Good wages, worker housing and an end to apartheid-like discrimination between Venezuelans and Americans (complete with separate bathroom facilities) were introduced by Rockefeller. This led him to branch out in support of projects designed to develop the economy of Venezuela as a whole. The result was the Venezuela Basic Economy Corporation, which invested in agricultural projects, supermarkets and fisheries as well as other concerns. Rivas traces the history of Rockefeller's varied enterprises (complete with numerous acronyms in English and Spanish) in detail. In the end, though launched with great optimism, large losses quickly resulted and most of the enterprises either failed by the 1950s or were reduced to much more modest proportions.

Elizabeth Cobbs has written on Rockefeller's more successful operations in Brazil.[1] One reason that Rockefeller's Brazilian enterprises were more successful than those in Venezuela is that they set out explicitly to make

money and not to become either a kind of private-sector social welfare system or an advertisement for the American way of life. Rivas notes the fundamental contradiction. Although in theory a responsible businessman benefits from his business activities as does the society in which he operates, in practice, Rockefeller was often driven more by a desire to do good and advance his pro-business, reforming political agenda than to make money. But Rockefeller's partners wanted to make money and he was eventually driven to separate his socially-directed enterprises from his profit-making businesses. In some cases, Rockefeller's name could be a disadvantage; although it certainly opened doors, it could also create an expectation of automatic profits among some of his local partners.

Rockefeller's name also attracted the unfavorable attention of the nationalist leader Romulo Betancourt. Betancourt, a populist who had been briefly a Communist, was a ferocious critic of Rockefeller, calling him "Johnny ten cents," and alleging that Rockefeller was only interested in fobbing off Venezuelan critics with a few cosmetic public relations projects (p. 72). Betancourt and his reformist Accion Democratica party came to power in a coup against the dictator Juan Vicente Gomez in October 1945. Even though Betancourt only lasted until 1948, he again became President from 1958 to 1964 and is the emblematic leader of modern, nationalist, oil-fueled Venezuela. Though initially suspect, Rockefeller's emollient personality enabled him to come to a working arrangement with Betancourt, whose own pragmatic reformism disinclined him to confrontation with Washington or with powerful potential allies. Betancourt made it clear that while he intended to maximize oil revenue, he did not mean to nationalize U.S. property.

As Rivas insists, her story makes it plain that "Rockefeller was not some stereotypical and cartoonish robber baron hiding behind a mask of liberal Republicanism" (p. 5). Although Rivas is correct to argue that the long dominant materialist and structuralist interpretation of U.S.-Latin American relationships is "insufficient," she does not show whether Rockefeller's activities were in the final analysis "good" for Venezuela, in either the sense of increasing Venezuela's aggregate national income, nor in that of distributing that income more widely—both of which were explicit aims of Rockefeller and his enterprises. So we do not know whether Rockefeller was successful in Venezuela, even on his own terms. Sophisticated advocates of dependency theories, like those of most economic explanations of politics and relations between subordinate and dominant powers, do not have to

argue that capitalists are bad people as individuals. Their argument, of course, is that the system behaves as it does for inherent systemic reasons and often does so in spite of specific intent. But Rivas has certainly debunked those vulgar stereotypes which point to Rockefellers and trilateral commissions when contending that Washington is consciously run by and for capitalists.

One reason why dependency theories and other approaches that emphasize the underdevelopment and subordinate status of Latin American countries continue to resonate, both in academia and in Latin America, is the evident failure of that region to develop in a satisfactorily equitable way. The high expectations of the post-war period, as epitomized by Rockefeller and his prominent good intentions, have not been fulfilled, and of course expectations are themselves an important social variable.

The second theme of *Missionary Capitalist* concerns the arousal of these expectations. It addresses the contradictions and eventual disappointments of U.S. policy towards Latin America in the era of the Good Neighbor policy and the Point Four program. These policies are indicted by Rivas precisely for inciting unrealistically high expectations—on both the American and the Venezuelan side. Mid-century Americans had great faith in the power of technology and, consequently, in technical and managerial expertise. This faith represented both a core part of Rockefeller's centrist ideas about the social potential of cooperative government-business relations and of his self-avowedly non-ideological "what works" attitude. It was an attitude shared by Venezuelans, who had great faith in the power of American methods, as Rivas points out.

In practice, however, the Good Neighbor and Point Four programs were little more than rhetoric. The Good Neighbor policy began as an attempt to move away from the military interventions that had characterized U.S.-Latin American relations since the Roosevelt and Wilson administrations. It rapidly became an effort to unite and insulate the Americas against the fascist threat, and to this end the Roosevelt administration refused to intervene in support of oil companies during the Mexican nationalization of 1938. During the war, the primary American objective was to obtain reliable supplies of such natural resources as oil and rubber. Rockefeller became involved with the more ambitious of the Good Neighbor policy's aims, trying to secure a long-term U.S. commitment to Latin American growth. Rivas traces in detail his involvement in Washington turf battles between those who saw Latin American policy as a small part of a big

war, and those, like Rockefeller, for whom Latin America was an aim in itself.

In line with Roosevelt's ecumenical style of politics, Rockefeller became a Republican Assistant Secretary of State for Latin American Affairs in 1944 in a Democratic administration, and continued to press for a wider and deeper commitment to hemispheric development. Against Rockefeller, however, was the basic fact that Latin America was a peripheral theater and by 1944 the danger to the western hemisphere was disappearing. But Rockefeller so ardently propounded inter-American solidarity—and in Washington, the Latin American points of view—that by 1945 Truman fired him.

The Point Four program was, if anything, even more ethereal than the Good Neighbor policy. It was named for being the fourth point in Truman's 1949 inauguration speech. It was, as Rivas explains, a point initially concocted for propagandistic purposes. Truman needed to say something about world poverty and he needed to rally international opinion behind the anti-Soviet cause. Therefore a vague proposal to use U.S. technology in some world-bettering manner became elevated rhetoric about "the improvement and growth of the underdeveloped areas of the world" (p. 173).

Although there was no program and no budget behind this announcement, Rockefeller was by then back in the administration as chairman of the Truman-appointed International Development Advisory Board. Once again, as Rivas explains, Rockefeller was back in the alphabet-soup world of committees and congressmen, a world he enjoyed and in which he had some small successes. But once again, Latin America was a subsidiary theater of concern, far behind Europe and Korea in the public and the political mind with no available resources comparable to those that went to the Marshall Plan, to Greece and Turkey, or to the war in Korea. Again, U.S. policy was one of benign neglect relieved by unrealistic expectations. Rivas is quite correct to point to the Atlanticism of Secretary of State Dean Acheson and his senior officials as being one of the roots of Rockefeller's problem; for most of Washington, history happened in the northern hemisphere.

Rivas is fundamentally sympathetic to Rockefeller. She suggests that his efforts may have in some way stimulated U.S. interest in Latin American development during the 1960's—though Fidel Castro was probably much more effective at that than Nelson Rockefeller. At bottom, this is a book about Rockefeller, and it paints a sympathetic picture of a man with a need to help, however

ineffective that help often was. It also paints a convincing picture of the policy-making process during the Roosevelt, Truman and early Eisenhower years. It is a not unfamiliar Washington picture of interests competing for advantage in an environment that is congenitally incapable of focusing on more than one issue at a time. In the world of Hitler and Stalin, Latin America was even

more obscure than usual, and not even the energetic advocacy of this rich and congenial man could change that.

Note

[1]. Elizabeth Anne Cobbs, *The Rich Neighbor Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

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