

CATTLE, CORRUPTION, AND
VENEZUELAN STATE FORMATION
DURING THE REGIME OF
JUAN VICENTE GÓMEZ, 1908–35

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Abstract: This essay seeks to expand our understanding of state formation in Venezuela by examining the business enterprises established by Juan Vicente Gómez and his political allies to exploit the agrarian economy, especially the cattle trade. It argues that these enterprises were critical both in cementing the allegiance of officials to Gómez, and in establishing the regime's authority over society. Venezuelans engaged in a variety of forms of protest against officials' profiteering and occasionally won concessions from the regime, signaling that corruption constituted an issue around which the terms of state control were negotiated. Relying on Gómez's correspondence, as well as British and U.S. diplomatic records, this essay argues that business networks among members of the regime fundamentally shaped not only the internal dynamics of the state, but also its relationship to society, a topic usually neglected in studies of Venezuelan state formation.

Class, as British historian E. P. Thompson famously observed, is “something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships.”¹ Historians examining state formation in Latin America have adopted similar assumptions, rejecting the reification of the state and insisting that its formation involves the ongoing transformation of at least two sets of human relationships, those among political elites and those between state officials and society. Within the political elite, those who hold positions of power jockey for advantage among themselves, seeking to consolidate their power through a variety of strategies but perhaps most often by building networks of patronage which over time become increasingly national in reach. Meanwhile, rulers and those over whom they seek to exercise authority engage in an unequal struggle to define the terms of domination. Each set of relationships, as recent scholarship emphasizes, is subject to constant negotiation as

1. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1963), 9.

actors maneuver to protect their economic, cultural, or political interests.² The process of state formation never reaches a point of finality or closure, even though particular states clearly experience periods of more intense centralization or fragmentation, greater or lesser ideological hegemony, and so on. Indeed, given scholars' increasingly sophisticated view of all power systems as inherently decentered and shifting, it seems that no single narrative could adequately capture a process of state formation in all its multifaceted complexity.³

In the historiography of Venezuela, the regime of Juan Vicente Gómez holds a prominent place in narratives of state formation.⁴ Before Gómez, the state had remained fragmented as local and regional strongmen controlled politics, monopolized military power, and prevented the emergence of a centralized state. Gómez, to a greater degree than previous national leaders, imposed his authority over local strongmen, built a stable system of national finances and administration, professionalized the military, improved the physical infrastructure connecting Venezuela's regions, and thus laid the foundations of Venezuela's modern, centralized state. Few historians would argue that his regime gained popular acceptance through its ideology of order and progress, or through its attempt to link Gómez's persona to that of Simón Bolívar; rather, the regime relied on repression to keep domestic opposition to a minimum.⁵

Analyses of Gómez's success in realizing his own vision of state-building often emphasize the importance of the oil industry and of U.S. and European support for the dictator.⁶ Cipriano Castro, Gómez's predecessor and erstwhile ally, had taken a decidedly nationalist stance against

2. Examples include Gilbert Joseph and Daniel Nugent, eds., *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994); and Richard Graham, *Patronage and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Brazil* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

3. Examples include Florencia Mallon, *Peasant and Nation: The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and Roger Lancaster, *Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

4. Steve Ellner, "Venezuelan Revisionist Political History, 1908–1958: New Motives and Criteria for Analyzing the Past," *Latin American Research Review* 30, no. 2 (1995):91–121.

5. On the regime's ideology, see Arturo Sosa, *La filosofía política del gomecismo* (Barquisimeto: Centro Gumilla, 1974), and Ciro Caraballo Perichi, *Obras públicas, fiestas y mensajes (un puntal del régimen gomecista)* (Caracas: Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1981). For Gómez's reliance on political terror, see Thomas Rourke, *Gómez, Tyrant of the Andes* (New York: William Morrow, 1941). On the army, see Angel Ziemis, *El gomecismo y la formación el ejército nacional* (Caracas: Ateneo de Caracas, 1979).

6. Luis C. Rodríguez, *Gómez: Agricultura, petróleo y dependencia* (Caracas: Trópykos, 1983); T. Polanco Alcantara, *Juan Vicente Gómez* (Caracas: Grijalbo, 1990); Y. Segnini, *La consolidación del régimen de Juan Vicente Gómez* (Caracas: Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1982); and B. S. McBeth, *Gunboats, Corruption, and Claims: Foreign Intervention in Venezuela, 1899–1908* (London: Greenwood, 2001).

foreign interests, and Gómez's willingness to adopt a more accommodating (even subservient) approach to Venezuela's relations with the great powers played a significant role in allowing him to replace Castro. Similarly, the argument goes, Gómez consolidated international support for his regime by inviting foreign oil companies to operate in Venezuela under generally favorable conditions. Once oil production began in earnest, in the early 1920s, the regime used petroleum revenues to accelerate the state-building projects already underway (such as infrastructure development and military professionalization). Indeed, a recent and widely celebrated work on the emergence of the modern state in Venezuela located its origins almost exclusively within the political economy of oil during the Gómez regime.⁷

Despite its dominance in the literature, this interpretation of the process of state formation has its limitations. The governments of the United States, Italy, and Britain were unhappy enough with Gómez to consider ousting him in the late 1910s.⁸ More broadly, any explanation of the regime that argues for the centrality of oil money has to confront a critical problem of timing.⁹ By the time oil wealth began to flow freely in the 1920s, Gómez had already been in power well over a decade, his hold on Venezuela had become virtually unbreakable, and the system that would continue until his death in 1935 was largely in place. Most importantly, analyses centered on oil and international diplomacy provide little sense of the role of the Venezuelan people in the process of state formation, for such histories hardly explore the dynamic between the state and society.

A similar emphasis on the role of international powers in the consolidation of authoritarian states also emerges in theoretical discussions of "sultanistic regimes," understood to be extreme cases of patrimonial authority characterized by the concentration of discretionary authority in the hands of a ruler who advances state and personal power through a mixture of rewards and repression.¹⁰ Juan Linz and H. E. Chehabi identify the Gómez regime as an early example of sultanism in Latin America,¹¹ though they emphasize later regimes, such as those of Rafael Trujillo, Fulgencio Batista, and the Somoza and Duvalier clans. While

7. Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 76–84.

8. J. Ewell, *Venezuela and the United States* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 120; Polanco Alcantara, *Gómez*, 247–58; and Beaumont to FO, 31 August 1917, Public Record Office (hereafter, PRO), Foreign Office (hereafter, FO) 371/3074.

9. Emilio Pacheco, *De Castro a López Contreras* (Caracas: Domingo Fuentes, 1984), 42.

10. H. E. Chehabi and Juan J. Linz, eds., *Sultanistic Regimes* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

11. H. E. Chehabi and Juan J. Linz, "A Theory of Sultanism 1: A Type of Nondemocratic Rule," in *ibid.*, 5; and *idem.*, "A Theory of Sultanism 2: Genesis and Demise of Sultanistic Regimes," in *ibid.*, 27.

Linz and Chehabi enumerate multiple factors in the rise of sultanistic regimes, they repeatedly emphasize the importance of foreign (usually U.S.) business and security interests in creating and maintaining sultanistic rulers, mirroring the emphasis on the international political economy of the oil industry in analyses of *gomecismo*.

Offering an alternative approach, this essay focuses on a prominent aspect of sultanism's domestic economy—corruption, defined here as the use of political authority to advance rulers' personal economic interests¹²—in order to understand how Gómez constructed enduring alliances with other members of the political elite while simultaneously consolidating state power over the Venezuelan people. I argue that much of the strength of the Gómez regime flowed from its ability to appropriate the resources of Venezuela's long-established economy of land, livestock, and agriculture, and to distribute these resources among members of the regime. Gómez orchestrated this process of appropriation by forming business partnerships with many of his state presidents and regional military commanders, the very men whose loyalty underwrote the centralization of political authority.¹³ These economic ties bound men of influence to Gómez throughout his years in power. Compared to analyses emphasizing international factors, this focus on *gomecistas'* corrupt dealings in the agrarian sector of the economy also affords greater insight into the dynamics by which the regime and the Venezuelan people negotiated the boundaries of state power.

Thus, rather than merely condemn corruption or note its existence as diagnostic of a specific type of regime, this analysis indicates that studies of corruption can yield important insights into state formation and state-society relationships.¹⁴ Such an analysis should prove especially suggestive for the study of sultanistic regimes, in view of the way that such rulers as Trujillo and the Somoza clan used their political power to establish business empires and personal fortunes.¹⁵ While the focus here is squarely on the Gómez regime, I hope that the argument regarding the connection between state formation and corruption—or, as I also call it, profiteering—is compelling enough that other scholars working on the formation of sultanistic regimes will find it useful.

12. For a discussion of various definitions of corruption, see Robin Theobald, *Corruption, Development, and Underdevelopment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 1–18.

13. Elías Pino Iturrieta, "Estudio Preliminar," in *Los hombres del Benemérito: epistolario inédito*, 2 vols. (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1985), vol. 1, 18–25; and Polanco Alcantara, *Gómez*, 435–43.

14. For a wider theoretical discussion, see Donatella della Porta and Alberto Vannucci, *Corrupt Exchanges: Actors, Resources and Mechanisms of Political Corruption* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1999).

15. Knut Walter, *The Regime of Anastacio Somoza, 1936–1956* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 109–10, 198–9; Robert D. Crassweller, *Trujillo: The Life and Times of a Caribbean Dictator* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 123–8, 251–9.

THE GÓMEZ REGIME AND THE CATTLE BUSINESS

The Gómez regime existed fundamentally as a business enterprise to monopolize wealth generated within the agrarian economy and to distribute it among the men who made up the official faction in power. During its twenty-seven years of existence, the regime came to exercise almost exclusive control over an array of resources such as cattle, beef, milk, heron plumes, salt, liquor, public lands in some regions, and the sale of foodstuffs in major urban markets. For Gómez and his allies, many of whom came from the provincial middle class, political power was never an end in itself, but rather a means of advancing their economic interests. Because these business enterprises relied on political power for their profitability, and because they functioned as partnerships among officials at various levels of the regime's hierarchy, they played a powerful integrative role in consolidating the regime. Meanwhile, many Venezuelans' experience of the Gómez dictatorship occurred through the monopolies, confiscations, and coerced economic transactions that became the hallmarks of Gomecista business networks.

Gómez established a tremendous variety of business partnerships with other state officials throughout his political career, but partnerships in the cattle trade always served as the focal point of his economic activity. This dedication to the cattle business flowed naturally from Gómez's life history. He made his living as a modest rancher and cattle trader in the western state of Táchira for many years before entering politics. During the administration of his *compadre* Cipriano Castro (1899–1908), Gómez occupied a variety of political and military offices, but devoted much of his attention to expanding his cattle business. He formed partnerships with Castro and other officials, and by 1903 he had become the largest supplier of beef to Caracas.¹⁶ This marriage between political power and the cattle business proved to be a double-edged sword, however, when Castro abruptly ended the partnership and imposed a lopsided settling of accounts which almost bankrupted Gómez. Hence, Gómez learned that the only secure business interests were those of the president.¹⁷

Upon seizing power in 1908, Gómez proceeded to expand his cattle enterprises across the country. Indeed, the logic of the industry dictated that any ambitious cattleman think in national terms.¹⁸ The *llanos*, stretching across the central and southern portions of Venezuela, had long

16. McBeth, *Gunboats*, 106–7.

17. For documents regarding these partnerships, see *Boletín del Archivo Histórico de Miraflores* (hereafter, *BAHM*) no. 89 (Jan. 1976):121–33; see also Polanco Alcantara, *Gómez*, 79–80, 84–7.

18. For background on Venezuela's cattle industry, see Gaston Carvallo, *El hato venezolano, 1900–1980* (Caracas: Tropykos, 1985), and Tarcila Briceño, *La ganadería en los llanos centro-occidentales venezolanos, 1910–1935* (Caracas: Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1985).

constituted the nation's primary region for the production of cattle herds. The major urban centers, providing the most lucrative domestic markets, lay well to the north; most were either on the Caribbean coast or within forty miles of it. (These cities included Venezuela's principal export centers, but Gómez's chief concern was always the domestic market for cattle and beef, presumably because he could control marketing, prices, and competitors.) Cattle raised in the *llanos* faced an arduous trek overland to market, which left them thin, worn, and in need of roughly two months' grazing before they could be profitably slaughtered in Caracas, Valencia, or other northern cities. Good pastureland near major markets was at a premium and could prove as critical to a cattle enterprise as extensive landholdings in the *llanos*. In sum, the large-scale production and marketing of cattle demanded a national strategy and could best be protected and advanced through a nation-wide system of political power.

During his years as president, Gómez became the largest landowner in Venezuela, at times creating the impression that he had an irrational obsession with the acquisition of territory. Most of his acquisitions, however, followed the logic of the cattle industry. He came to own vast expanses of the *llanos*, but unlike most ranchers he gave equal attention to the acquisition of pastureland in the vicinity of the northern markets.¹⁹ Maracay, the city sixty miles west of Caracas where Gómez had his primary residence from 1911 onward, and which became the center of his cattle empire, was located at the natural entryway for cattle herds driven from the *llanos* to the coastal region. Gómez (like his business partners, Antonio Pimentel and Félix Galavís) often established his northern pastures by acquiring agricultural land and converting it to pasture. One dramatic ecological transformation involved the conversion of extensive sugar fields around Lake Valencia into grazing land for Gómez's cattle during the early years of the regime. "[I]t is," wrote the British minister in 1912, searching for a comparison that readers at the Foreign Office would grasp, "as if the most agricultural districts of Lincolnshire were turned into a deer park."²⁰ This land became part of Gómez's Maracay ranches, around which much of his daily routine revolved. Rising at four o'clock each morning, Gómez customarily spent several hours transacting official business before spending much of the day at his nearby estates, inspecting his herds.²¹

19. Gómez's property acquisitions are listed in C. Dupuy, *Propiedades del General Juan Vicente Gómez* (Caracas: Contraloría General de la República, 1983).

20. "Venezuela Annual Report, 1912," p. 12, PRO, FO 371/1861. For Pimentel and Galavís, see Luis C. Rodríguez, "Gómez y el agro," in Elías Pino Iturrieta, ed., *Juan Vicente Gómez y su época* (Caracas: Monte Avila, 1988), 104.

21. Polanco Alcantara, *Gómez*, 416.

Gómez achieved the rapid expansion of his cattle interests largely by establishing business partnerships with regional military commanders and state presidents. These officials often joined their capital (and their influence) with that of Gómez to buy land and livestock in their jurisdictions and then assumed responsibility for management of the enterprise.²² After receiving one such proposal from General Pedro Murillo, an appointee in Táchira, Gómez sent a typical response:

I received your letter of the 7th of last month. You're always thinking about cattle deals. I'm the same way, and I'm glad the opportunity presents itself for us to join our fortunes together. I wish for you to make this investment with money from each of us, and for this purpose you can count on the sum Antonio mentioned to me.²³

Beginning in the mid-1910s, British and American diplomats reported that Gómez and his allies, especially military commanders and state presidents, had established a "monopoly" over the domestic market for cattle and beef in large areas of the republic.²⁴

Political power came to shape every facet of the cattle business. Ranchers offering property or livestock for sale were required to give Gómez or his local representative first option to buy.²⁵ Owners who, when asked, refused to part with their properties were vulnerable to various forms of persuasion. One recalcitrant woman agreed to sell her land only after officials rounded up all her laborers, ostensibly for military service, leaving her with no labor to work the estate.²⁶ Other property owners who declined to sell to Gómez at the prices he set were threatened with confinement in one of the regime's infamous prisons.²⁷ With such means at his disposal, the General rarely paid the market value when purchasing land and cattle.

22. Baldó to Gómez, 25 March 1915, in *BAHM* nos. 61–3 (1969):72–3; and Galavís to Gómez, 2 Oct. 1910, *Los hombres*, vol. 1, 327–8. Baldó was state president of Portuguesa, and Galavís was Inspector General of the Army. See also Peter Linder, "Agriculture and Rural Society in Pre-Petroleum Venezuela: The Sur del Lago Zuliano, 1880–1920," Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin at Austin, 1992, 230–2.

23. Gómez to Murillo, 5 Dec. 1908, *BAHM* nos. 114–15 (1981–82):9.

24. Harford to Grey, 12 Feb. 1914, PRO, FO 420/258; McGoodwin to Department of State (hereafter DS), 10 Feb. 1914, 831.00/630, National Archive and Records Administration (hereafter NARA), Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Venezuela, 1910–29, microcopy no. 366; and Freeman to McGoodwin, enclosed in McGoodwin to DS, 8 Oct. 1917, 831.00/807, NARA, microcopy 366.

25. "Venezuela. Annual Report, 1914," in PRO, FO 371/ 2501; and Emilio Arévalo Cedeño, *Viva Arévalo Cedeño (el libro de mis luchas)* (Caracas: Selevon, 1979 [orig., 1936]), 9–11.

26. Harford to Grey, 6 July 1915, PRO, FO 371/2502.

27. Harford to Grey, 29 Jan. 1916, PRO, FO 371/2801. In eastern Venezuela, according to a U.S. consul, "Men who have refused to sell their farms to [Gómez] or his friends . . . have been sent to prison as political offenders, have had troops camped upon their

Much of the money for Gómez's acquisitions came from the public treasury rather than from his own private funds. In some cases, Gómez simply took large sums of money from public revenues. By 1917, such appropriations occurred so regularly in the summer of each year that *Caraqueños* (residents of Caracas) dubbed them "the annual fund drive upon the National Treasury."²⁸ Gómez reportedly distributed some of the funds to various high-ranking officials but kept roughly 90 percent (2.7 million *bolívares*) for himself, presumably using the money to invest in his business ventures.

Public revenues underwrote Gómez's investments in other ways as well. The dictator engaged in a number of highly favorable property transactions with the national government, always buying property from the state at a price well below its true value and selling property to the state at inflated prices. Gómez acquired several large properties in the *llanos* through an advantageous exchange with the national government in 1915, trading modest urban properties for more valuable ranches that the national government had seized from the exiled Castro and his relatives.²⁹ Similarly, in 1926 Gómez sold to the nation a rural estate (El Caura, in Bolívar state) for 17 million *bolívares*, though he had paid only a quarter million for the property, and apparently used the profits to buy other rural properties.³⁰ Gómez continued to engage in comparable transactions (all approved by the national congress) into the early 1930s.³¹ The most valuable properties Gómez acquired in this fashion were connected to the cattle empire he built with his collaborators.

To guarantee markets for their ever-expanding herds, Gómez and his allies used various tactics to ensure that their competitors captured only a small share of Venezuela's domestic market for beef. For example, state governments imposed hefty taxes on the movement of livestock across state boundaries, imposing prohibitive costs on cattlemen taking livestock north to market, but officials did not collect the levies on herds belonging to Gómez and his allies.³² Vincencio Pérez Soto, the president of the state of Apure, wrote to Gómez in 1915 to assure him that

places and have had young goats by the thousands turned into their plantations of cocoa." Brett to DS, 23 Sept. 1915, 831.00/753, NARA, microcopy 366.

28. McGoodwin to DS, 3 Aug. 1917, 831.52/49, NARA, microcopy 366. Gómez also reportedly skimmed four percent of all Venezuelan payments to British creditors. McGoodwin to DS, 21 Sept. 1917, 831.51/52, *ibid.*

29. Dupuy, *Propiedades del General*, 46; and Harford to Grey, 6 July 1915, PRO, FO 371/2502.

30. Polanco Alcantara, *Gómez*, 476; and Cook to DS, 26 June 1926, 831.00/1302, NARA, microcopy 366.

31. Summerlin to DS, 15 July 1931, 831.00/1487, Box 5785, Record Group 59, National Archives, College Park, Maryland (hereafter, NA).

32. Beaumont to Curzon, 26 May 1923, PRO, FO 371/8530.

here nothing is being charged on your cattle for the State or Municipal dues, nor are the Municipal dues being charged on your horses that enter [San Fernando de Apure], because this is what is just with me being in this office [*puesto*].³³

Similarly, León Jurado, as president of Guárico (also in the *llanos*), proposed a new cattle tax in 1924, but made it clear that he would selectively enforce the new levy. As Jurado explained to Gómez's secretary,

we understand that those [cattle] of our Chief and of some friends will remain exempt from this tax, but not those who speculate in this sector and take out large lots; it is just that they should pay a tax[.]³⁴

Jurado and Pérez Soto, both long-time allies and business partners of Gómez, presumably exempted their own herds from state and local taxes as well.

To guarantee the official faction a final advantage over potential competitors in the cattle business, Gómez established control over the butchering of cattle in the municipal slaughterhouses of the major urban markets. He appointed inspectors to the public slaughterhouses in the principal cities and instructed them to reject any cattle of "doubtful origin" and to accept only cattle that had been "properly fattened."³⁵ Such admonitions were understood to mean that only cattle coming from pasturelands or ranches belonging to Gómez and his allies should be accepted for butchering. Indeed, some diplomatic personnel believed that government-appointed inspectors even permitted the slaughter and public sale of *diseased* cattle belonging to government officials.³⁶

This monopoly of the cattle trade and the marketing of beef made the power of the state a reality in the lives of many Venezuelans. Ranchers and cattle traders who fell afoul of the official cartel found their livelihoods eroded or destroyed. Reporting on the numerous Venezuelan refugees leaving Táchira to live in Colombia, the U.S. minister asserted that many were "cattle raisers, large and small, who claim to have been driven out of that industry by Generals [Juan Vicente] Gómez and [Félix] Galavís, who have an absolute monopoly on cattle raising and the sale of beef and all by-products."³⁷ The Gomecista monopoly had similar effects in the *llanos*. Emilio Arévalo Cedeño, who became a leading anti-Gómez rebel, wrote of the anger and humiliation he experienced when, in 1913, he was forced to trade horses and cattle with Gómez's representative in San Fernando de Apure. The prices imposed by Gómez left Arévalo ruined. He claimed that he and other cattlemen had little choice

33. Pérez Soto to Gómez, 26 June 1915, in *Los hombres*, vol. 2, 276.

34. Jurado to Urdaneta Maya, 23 June 1924, in *Los hombres*, vol. 2, 84–5.

35. Gómez to Martínez Méndez, 4 Dec. 1913, *BAHM* nos. 64–66 (1970):299; and Hidalgo to Gómez, 2 Sept. 1915, *BAHM* nos. 61–63 (1969):359–60.

36. Work to Harford, 14 May 1915, PRO, FO 199/224.

37. McGoodwin to DS, 10 Feb. 1914, 831.00/630, NARA, microcopy 366.

but to rebel in order to save their honor and “what little remained of our interests.”³⁸

Consumers of beef suffered from the official monopoly less than did ranchers and cattle traders, but for them as well formerly mundane transactions became concrete reminders of the state’s power. Gómez’s beef monopoly in major cities kept prices high. His representatives and inspectors controlled the weighing of meat and were said to give consumers only twelve ounces of beef while charging for a pound.³⁹ In Gómez’s home state of Táchira, the monopoly meant that consumers paid twice as much for beef as consumers just across the border in Colombia.⁴⁰ The British minister reported on a new affront to consumers—the sale of chilled beef—in the early 1930s:

A few years ago [Gómez] erected model dairies and a slaughter-house at Maracay to supply the neighboring country as far as Caracas with dairy products and meat. The meat is killed at Maracay and chilled and then shipped to Caracas in refrigerating vans. This chilling has the effect of improving the meat, making it more tender. This has been the cause of much dissatisfaction in the capital, where the taste is decidedly in favor of tough, freshly killed meat, and in the family circle the other variety is referred to as *carne podrida* (‘rotten meat’). The residents, however, have no choice in the matter, and must either buy the meat supplied by the President or go without. In certain of the suburbs which lie outside the Caracas jurisdiction this freshly-killed variety is obtainable, but the road is well watched to prevent any smuggling, and cars, both commercial and private, are frequently stopped and searched.⁴¹

The simple act of buying and eating chilled meat became an act of submission to the Gómez regime—no less so than the forced sales of land and cattle to the dictator and his allies. State power transformed these commonplace transactions into vibrant reminders of the regime’s increasing control over everyday life.

In the last years of his life, Gómez undertook an extensive restructuring of the industry, seeking to defuse widespread resentment. In 1934, the government announced the formation of the *Compañía Ganadera Industrial Venezolana* for the sale of chilled and preserved meats, presenting it as the salvation of the cattle industry. As the British legation reported, the initiative came

at an opportune moment, since it must be admitted that many were beginning to lose their patience with the policy of the President and his friends, who have systematically smothered all enterprise in which they were not personally

38. Arévalo Cedeño, *Viva Arévalo*, 8 (see also pp. 9–11).

39. “The Situation in Venezuela,” McGoodwin to DS, 16 March 1914, 831.00/640, NARA, microcopy 366.

40. Sauer to DS, 31 March 1919, 831.00/898, NARA, microcopy 366.

41. “Venezuela Annual Report, 1932,” 17, PRO, FO 371/16622.

interested, and a certain murmuring had begun against them which had even become more or less public.⁴²

The reorganization of the industry promised stock raisers the free movement of herds, as well as opportunities to buy shares in the company and to sell cattle to the company's slaughterhouse at Maracay. But it was also apparent from the outset that the company would be built around Gómez, the principal shareholder, and the state presidents, who would be invited to buy shares and would now have a stake in the unhindered transit of cattle belonging to the company. As the British report explained,

The company is to guarantee the President an income of 11,000 bolívares per day, that is taking forty to forty-five beasts per diem at the rate of 7 bolívares per arroba, with which must be included certain minor additional fees. The remaining breeders may sell their stock, which is now to be granted free movement, to the company at 4 bolívares per arroba, the difference in price being partly accounted for by the fact that these cattle will not be classified as 'fatted stock' as are the general's, and partly, it may be said, to keep the general good. The company is to consist of various shareholders, including the President, the Governors of States (who thus will have a stake in the industry and will not wish to follow their previous policy of obstruction), and certain capitalists in the country who have interests in cattle. This scheme may, perhaps, be the saving of the cattle breeders, who, with the present policy of monopoly and suppression, are almost starving.⁴³

That the company could be organized so clearly for Gómez's benefit and still be viewed as a concession to those who had suffered under the previous system of monopoly, provides a dramatic testimony to the General's control of the cattle industry at the time of the company's founding. At best, it now offered ranchers an outlet for some of their cattle and a more predictable, less arbitrary working environment. In granting Gómez and some of the state presidents control of the company, the arrangement affirmed the common knowledge that the Gomecista state existed largely as a business enterprise.

The reduction in cattle taxes that occurred with the organization of the company may have reinvigorated the livestock trade and lowered consumer prices, at least in some regions. In San Fernando, the capital of Apure and a center of the cattle trade, the retail price of meat fell from 1.5 or 2.0 *bolívares* per kilo to as low as 0.5 *bolívares* within months of the company's creation. Meanwhile, the number of steers processed at the municipal slaughterhouse rose from two per day to six or seven.⁴⁴

42. "Memorandum on the present conditions, economic and commercial, in Venezuela," enclosed in Keeling to Simon, 2 March 1934, PRO, FO 371/17618. See also, Rodríguez, "Gómez y el agro," 104.

43. See "Memorandum" in note 43 above. At 1934 exchange rates, 11,000 *bolívares* was US\$3,000.

44. Ramírez to Gómez, 24 May 1934, in *Los hombres*, vol. 2, 331–2.

Within a year, however, it became clear that the company operated principally for the benefit of Gómez and his closest allies. Half the cattle slaughtered by the company at Maracay came from the General's herds, presumably sold by him at the inflated prices mentioned above. Other ranchers selling to the company at its slaughterhouse found themselves obliged to graze their livestock on Gómez's lands "at exorbitant charges" before the company would buy.⁴⁵ Gómez also owned the land on which the company's facilities were constructed, and charged a hefty rent each month. Much of the money paid by the company to Gómez for cattle and rent came from the national government, which granted the company an annual subsidy ranging from 5 to 7.5 million *bolívares*.⁴⁶

In short, whatever hopes the company may have raised soon came crashing down as the true nature of the enterprise came to light, angering ranchers, consumers, and taxpayers at a single stroke. Gómez's death in December 1935, less than two years after the company's founding, caught public outrage at its peak. In the upheaval that followed the dictator's demise, rioters sacked the company's retail shops in Caracas.⁴⁷

STATE PRESIDENTS, THE MILITARY, AND THE ETIQUETTE OF PROFITEERING

If the cattle cartel provided the most fully developed model of the Gomecista state as a business enterprise, other ventures designed for profiteering from the agrarian economy emerged as recognizable variations on the model. To be sure, the cattle monopoly constructed by Gómez and his allies proved unique in that it was national in scope, was based on joint investments of capital by Gómez and his top allies, and was active from the early years of the regime to the very end. Other enterprises designed to appropriate resources and distribute them among the regime's officials did not take on this full ensemble of characteristics. Most were confined to a particular region or locality, and some were short lived. Also, while any enterprise of significance needed Gómez's approval, he did not invest his capital in every one. Nevertheless, the cattle cartel did share vital characteristics with the other business enterprises of Gomecista officials. All such ventures depended on political power to function and reproduced power through the distribution of profits up and down the political hierarchy, binding men to each other and to Gómez for their mutual benefit and thus strengthening the state.

The role of these enterprises in integrating and maintaining the network of state presidents who comprised the core of the Gomecista system deserves special emphasis. Gómez's preference for state presidents

45. "Venezuela, Annual Report, 1935," PRO, FO 371/19847.

46. *Ibid.*, and Keeling to Simon, 20 May 1935, PRO, FO 371/18782.

47. Nicholson to DS, 30 Dec. 1935, 831.00/1557, Box 5785, Record Group 59, NA.

as business partners became clear in the development of his cattle business. In part this reflected the presidents' abilities to supervise ranches and the movement of herds in the provinces. Gómez also appreciated the paramount importance of state presidents in maintaining the military security of his regime. The state presidents appointed by Gómez almost invariably had won the title of "general" in Venezuela's civil wars, while men appointed to cabinet posts usually came from the urban professions or worked their way up the bureaucracy. Many of the state presidents had fought alongside Gómez when he and Castro seized power in 1899 and when Gómez led the suppression of the anti-Castro revolt of 1901–3. Despite his growing reliance on the most professionalized units of the army, which were usually stationed at Maracay or Caracas, Gómez valued the military experience of the state presidents and relied on them to suppress revolts in the outlying provinces.⁴⁸ The state presidents commanded ragged armies of forced recruits with little training, but if collectively disaffected, these regional officials could threaten the regime.

Speculation about the loyalty of various state presidents became a staple of the Caracas rumor mill,⁴⁹ but their business partnerships with Gómez aided in preserving their fealty. Investment in land or other fixed assets gave the state presidents a clear stake in the preservation of the regime because such property would surely be seized in the event that the regime was overthrown. Vincencio Pérez Soto, who served Gómez as the president of several states, assumed that the dictator noticed which of his allies invested their money in Venezuela and which ones sent their money out of the country, hedging their bets, as it were. While serving as president of the western state of Zulia, Soto took special care to inform Gómez that he recently had sunk his money into an hacienda near Puerto Cabello, calling the estate "a kind of money-box [*alcancía*] for my savings." He continued:

By investing all my cash reserves in this estate, I hope that you will see my unwavering faith in the future of our Cause at this time, and my decided will to accompany and serve you until the end; for those friends who hoard resources and do not buy real estate [*bienes raíces*] give the impression that they are thinking of a possible retreat, while those of us who follow your example, invest what we have because we harbor much faith, and in the last instance our retreat is to the only point that honor accepts: six feet under ground. And for that journey one needs no resources.⁵⁰

48. For examples, see C. Heredia, *El año 29: recuento de la lucha armada* (Caracas: Avilarte, 1974); and the documents in "La campaña de Apure," *BAHM* nos. 130–2 (1989–90):163–208.

49. McGoodwin to DS, 13 April 1914, 831.00/651, NARA, microcopy 366; and McGoodwin to DS, 27 Jan. 1919, 831.00/887, *ibid.*

50. Pérez Soto to Gómez, 3 March 1928, in *Los hombres*, vol. 2, 301–2.

Despite the obsequious tone of the letter, Gómez probably valued this expression of loyalty, coming as it did just after the student protests of February 1928, one of the most serious challenges faced by the regime. Moreover, Gómez could take comfort that Pérez Soto—occasionally rumored to be planning a U.S. backed succession of the western oil region—was investing some of his petroleum skimmings in central Venezuela.

There developed, in short, an etiquette of profiteering.⁵¹ Officials' devotion to the regime could be judged by the enterprises in which they invested. But Gómez, who kept virtually his entire fortune in Venezuela,⁵² was also bound by certain expectations. The state presidents expected Gómez to allow them access to the financial spoils of office, either through partnerships with him or through their own local enterprises which could be guaranteed profits through the application of political muscle. Successive presidents of the state of Apure, for example, joined with Gómez in controlling much of the lucrative trade in *garza* (heron) plumes by rigidly enforcing the law against shooting herons, and then sending their agents to shoot the birds with impunity.⁵³ So numerous were the state presidents who controlled a share of the liquor trade in their regions that Gómez would have offended any president to whom he denied a cut without good cause.⁵⁴ In turn, of course, state presidents needed to share the spoils of their enterprises with their own subordinates (for example, the *jefes civiles* [district governors]) in order to keep local administration running smoothly. Quite naturally, the fundamental rule in the etiquette of profiteering was that all officials who played a part in operating or protecting an enterprise should share in its profits.⁵⁵

This ethos clearly governed the transfer of public lands to private ownership in Crespo, the coffee-growing district north of Barquisimeto in the state of Lara. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, peasant migrants established coffee farms on the unclaimed national lands that stretched north of the town of Duaca, the district capital,

51. For an account of the etiquette of bribery in India, see A. Gupta, "Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State," *American Ethnologist* 22, no. 2 (1995):379–81.

52. Polanco Alcantara, *Gómez*, 456.

53. Williams to DS, 30 Nov. 1922, 831.6232/3, NARA, microcopy 366; Dormer to Curzon, 1 March 1920, PRO, FO 371/4622; Pérez Soto to Gómez, 3 Jan. 1919, *BAHM* no. 74 (1972):195; Pérez Soto to Gómez, 1 Sept. 1919, in *ibid.*, 206–8; and Pérez Soto to Gómez, 4 July 1920, *ibid.*, 228–30.

54. García to Gómez, 21 May 1913, in *Los hombres*, vol. 1, 357–8; Pérez Soto to Gómez, 29 Nov. 1924, in *Los hombres*, vol. 2, 285–6; Jurado to Gómez, 16 Dec. 1931, in *ibid.*, 91–92; Rivas to Gómez, 14 Feb. 1931, in *ibid.*, 379–80.

55. For social expectations surrounding corruption in Africa, see J. P. Olivier de Sardan, "A Moral Economy of Corruption in Africa?," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 37, no. 1 (1999):25–52.

but they did not acquire private title to the lands they farmed. An alliance of Gomecista officials carried out the privatization and distribution of these public lands, amounting to over 25,000 hectares, in the late 1910s and early 1920s. The national government had to approve the granting of private title to public lands, but local officials planned and implemented the process of privatization. Most of the coffee-growing lands transferred to private ownership became the property of these very officials—two presidents of Lara, the *jefes civiles* of Crespo and Barquisimeto, and Crespo's district judge, as well as various local entrepreneurs with ties to prominent Gomecistas. Few of the coffee farmers living on the former public domain received title to the land they occupied, even though the public land laws stipulated that occupants should receive first option to obtain title. The vast majority became tenants on the newly titled estates owned by the politically powerful and found themselves subjected to an increasingly onerous system of rents. Peasant discontent in the district dramatized the new landlords' heightened dependence on one another for mutual protection. For those who had used political influence to gain ownership of land occupied by peasant producers, the strength and unity of the Gomecista state was now their best bulwark against popular retribution.⁵⁶

This etiquette mandating the distribution of spoils extended to operations involving the army. Periodic revolts against the regime provided the army with ample opportunities for profiteering. Most commonly, troops in the field commandeered cattle and horses from ranches as "supplies," or seized livestock as "fines" from *llaneros* accused of sympathizing with rebels, in one case taking 300 steers from a single estate.⁵⁷ Some of the livestock taken in this fashion "found its way to the *potreros* [pasture lands] belonging to Gómez," according to an English businessman whose travels landed him in the middle of two revolts between 1914 and 1915.⁵⁸ But military forces in the field also sold much of the livestock they appropriated, keeping a share of the profits for themselves, as was their right within the regime's ethic of profiteering.⁵⁹

One of the best documented cases of the military appropriating resources for distribution among its own officers and other Gomecista officials occurred in the cacao-growing region of Los Caños, in the eastern state of Sucre. At the end of 1914, rebels in Los Caños sacked a valuable cacao plantation owned jointly by Gómez and his former mistress,

56. Doug Yarrington, *A Coffee Frontier: Land, Society, and Politics in Duaca, Venezuela, 1830–1936* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), 138–55.

57. "Venezuela Annual Report, 1914," p. 4, PRO, FO 371/2501.

58. Cecil Meyerheim, "Memorandum on Revolutionary Efforts in the Eastern Areas of Venezuela," 27 April 1915, enclosed with Harford to Grey, 28 April 1915, PRO, FO 371/2502.

59. *Ibid.*; and Elliott to Dormer, 30 Dec. 1920, PRO, FO 199/219.

Dionisia Bello. In retaliation, Gómez ordered Generals Paulino Torres and Clemente González to occupy other estates in the region and recoup the losses by harvesting and selling the cacao crop. Troops dispatched from Caracas and Maracay stayed on the estates for six months, despite vigorous protests from French, Italian, and British diplomats on behalf of the foreigners who owned and worked on several of the estates and who suffered arrest, confinement, and interrogation by government forces.⁶⁰ Dr. Ezequiel Vivas, Gómez's secretary and liaison with field commanders in Los Caños, attempted to justify the troops' actions by coercing captured workers to declare that the estate owners had aided the rebels, but the workers refused, even after suffering confinement in the regime's notorious prison at Puerto Cabello.⁶¹ Pressing claims for damages, the British legation assembled evidence that proceeds from the sale of seized cacao were distributed widely among the officers who carried out the operation, with additional shares going to Gómez, Bello, and Vivas.⁶² The attack on foreign nationals and their property made the incident unusual and produced especially extensive documentation, but the distribution of spoils among officers, officials, and Gómez's clan followed the unwritten code governing all such enterprises.⁶³

When an official disregarded this etiquette and claimed a disproportionate share of the spoils for himself, the resulting rift in the regime was occasionally serious enough that it became public knowledge. Such a conflict erupted in the western state of Zulia between President Isilio Febres Cordero and the *jefe civil* of Maracaibo, General Juan Fernández. Customarily, the *jefes civiles* shared with their state presidents the money they collected through a variety of extralegal practices.⁶⁴ In 1926, however, Fernández and Febres Cordero quarreled over the "fines" collected from vendors in Maracaibo's public market, as well as the bribes Fernández demanded for the release of men forcibly recruited for military service.⁶⁵ The U.S. consul in Maracaibo reported that the breach

60. Harford to Grey, 15 March 1915, PRO, FO 371/2051.

61. McGoodwin to DS, 1 March 1915, 831.00/722, NARA, microcopy 366.

62. For most documentation of events in Los Caños, see the two files: "Caños, Government Raid On," PRO, FO 199/185; and "Caños, Government Raid On and Claims," PRO, FO 199/186. See also Harford to Grey, 16 July 1915, PRO, FO 371/2501; Harford to Grey, 13 Aug. 1915, PRO, FO 371/2051; Beaumont to Balfour, 15 Oct. 1917, PRO, FO 371/3074; and "Memorandum de los hechos realizados," BAHM nos. 61–3 (1969), pp. 183–5. For testimony from two British subjects, see Thomas to British Minister, 12 March 1915, PRO, FO 371/2501; and Rochemont to British Minister, 29 March 1915, PRO, FO 371/2501.

63. For the 1921 settlement of the claims, see "Venezuela Annual Report, 1921," PRO, FO 371/7325.

64. "Venezuela Annual Report, 1932," 12, PRO, FO 371/16622; and Parada, *De Ocumare*, 74–5.

65. Sloan to DS, 8 April 1926, 831.00/1293, NARA microcopy 366.

between the two officials had become so bitter and so public that one of them would have to be removed from office. Soon thereafter, Febres Cordero was transferred.⁶⁶

Gómez's success in controlling and centralizing state power for twenty-seven years resulted, in large part, from his ability to allocate spoils among his allies in accordance with the political needs of the moment. His surviving correspondence leaves no doubt that Gómez personally regulated the distribution of spoils. He decided which of his allies could sell cattle, and in what quantities, to the public slaughterhouses in the major urban centers.⁶⁷ He distributed the local liquor concessions, one of the most sought after perquisites of office.⁶⁸ Even when Gómez turned certain enterprises over to relatives or close associates, he maintained ultimate control. José Vicente Gómez, one of the dictator's sons and for a time his heir apparent, oversaw the control of gambling houses, but when he disagreed with the president of Sucre over the management of such businesses in the state, Juan Vicente settled the dispute.⁶⁹

Gómez's success in building a national state cannot be separated from his success in regulating the etiquette of profiteering across the vast expanse of Venezuelan territory. The dictator's ability to enforce his will in such matters rested on a number of factors—his control of the best equipped and trained units of the military (always stationed in Maracay or Caracas), his international support, and the increasingly robust condition of the national treasury. But surely one of the most powerful motivations for state presidents and regional military commanders to remain loyal to Gómez was the certainty of sharing in the spoils (including, eventually, the lucrative oil concessions) even if, on occasion, Gómez made a decision that disadvantaged them in a particular enterprise.

RITUALS OF SUBMISSION, POPULAR RESISTANCE, AND THE NEGOTIATION OF RULE

The argument thus far has focused on the integrative role of profiteering in consolidating relationships among the politically powerful,

66. *Ibid.* In June, Gómez transferred Febres Cordero to the presidency of Trujillo. The U.S. minister believed Gómez removed Febres because he proved too weak to govern Zulia; see "General Conditions Prevailing in Venezuela," enclosed with Cook to DS, 7 June 1926, 831.00/1298, NARA, microcopy 366. Fernández's challenge to Febres added to the perception of the latter's weakness.

67. Galavis to Gómez, 24 Sept. 1925, and 23 Sept. 1926, in *Los hombres*, vol. 1, 333–4 and 335–6.

68. González to Gómez, 4 Sept. 1911, in *Los hombres*, vol. 1, 493–4; García to Gómez, 21 May 1913, in *Los hombres*, vol. 1, 357; and Pérez Soto to Gómez, 14 Nov. 1913, in *Los hombres*, vol. 2, 271–2.

69. Parada, *De Ocumare*, 75–6. The dictator supported the state president's efforts to curb gambling.

but profiteering's contribution to state formation went much further. Corruption also played a role in extending and tightening the regime's hold on Venezuelan society. The economic enterprises of political officials infused daily life with reminders of state power. As coerced economic transactions multiplied with the spread of profiteering, they injected political symbolism into everyday routines, ritualizing submission to the regime. Whenever consumers bought meat, whenever a cattle breeder sold his stock to one of Gómez's representatives in a bad bargain, whenever a tenant on one of Crespo's new estates paid rent, whenever a *llanero* refrained from shooting a heron for its plumes while knowing that agents of the state president could shoot it with impunity—they participated in the display of the state's increasing penetration of society. The repetition of these routine acts of submission made acceptance of Gomecista power the norm and, as such acts became increasingly ubiquitous, they instilled a sense that the regime's continuation was, if not inevitable, at least highly probable.⁷⁰

The diffusion of rituals of submission contributed to one of the distinctive hallmarks of Gómez's rule: his psychological hold on the Venezuelan people. One of the first twentieth-century Latin American rulers to establish an effective reign of terror, Gómez succeeded in convincing ordinary people that they were under constant surveillance, with some even attributing to Gómez omniscient powers as a *brujo* (sorcerer).⁷¹ The regime's security network and the stories of brutality seeping out of its prisons contributed to Venezuelans' fear of the regime, but the way in which Gómez's business networks saturated society, transforming commonplace transactions into rituals of obedience, must have contributed to Venezuelans' sense that the regime was too entrenched, too omnipresent, to be dislodged. As evidence of state power became ever more pervasive in daily life, it became easier to believe that Gómez controlled all and knew all, and that swift punishment surely awaited those who resisted his authority.

It is all the more remarkable, then, that Venezuelans undertook a variety of actions to protest against the profiteering which, in the eyes of many, formed the regime's reason for being. One of the most ideologically incisive protests against Gomecista corruption came in 1928. In the springtime of that year, following the anti-Gómez student demonstra-

70. For a theoretical discussion linking ritual to the normalization of state power, see William Beezley, Cheryl English Martin, and William E. French, "Introduction: Constructing Consent, Inciting Conflict," in idem., eds., *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance: Public Celebrations and Popular Culture in Mexico* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1994), xiii–xxii.

71. Germán Carrera Damas, "Gómez el hombre," in Arturo Sosa et al., *Gómez, Gomecismo y Antigomecismo* (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1987), 198–99; Rourke, *Tyrant*, 133.

tions of February, rumors began to circulate in Caracas that the government would soon purchase the Hotel Miramar in the coastal town of Macuto as part of a supposed plan to advance tourism. Caraqueños knew that the hotel belonged to Gómez, and that he had used public funds to construct it. So, the rumored purchase, at the price of five million *bolívares* (equivalent to US\$1 million), would mark the second time that the national treasury had paid for the facility. Furthermore, the hotel suffered from a poor reputation and was often empty. In sum, the state was about to acquire a dubious property while adding to Gómez's immense fortune. Then one morning, a sign was found hanging from the statue of Simón Bolívar in the main plaza of the city. It read simply:

FOR SALE

Bs. 5,000,000

By J.V. Gómez

Some days later, a decree finalized the sale of the Hotel Miramar, at the same price indicated by the placard hung in the Plaza Bolívar. Gómez made his deal, but suffered public humiliation in the process.⁷²

The anonymous sign on Bolívar's statue must have delighted Caraqueños as a confirmation of their celebrated *viveza*—that combination of cleverness, daring, and wit which forms a central aspect of the reputed Venezuelan character. Moreover, the symbolism of the sign's location made it a devastating piece of political theater. By juxtaposing the issue of profiteering to the personage of Bolívar, those who secreted the sign into the plaza struck at one of the ideological foundations of the regime and aligned themselves with the rhetoric of the student protests several months before. The Gómez regime—like several of its predecessors, and like every Venezuelan regime since—elevated Bolívar as a unifying symbol of the nation, propagated a selective version of Bolívar's ideology, and sought to identify itself as the sole agent of the Liberator's vision for national development.⁷³ The students who mobilized against the regime in February of 1928 had appropriated Bolivarian symbols for their own cause by stressing the civic, democratic and nationalistic elements of the Liberator's (often contradictory) legacy.⁷⁴ What emerged was a debate that has reproduced itself in Venezuelan politics, in varying forms, down to the present, as each side sought to identify itself as

72. Engert to DS, 25 May 1928. 831.00/1380, NARA, microcopy 366.

73. Rourke, *Tyrant*, 137–38; and Caraballo Perichi, *Obras públicas*, 71–3.

74. Students were motivated in part by opposition to Gómez's "política interior de peculado y monopolio." Rómulo Betancourt and M. Otero Silva, as quoted in A. Sosa, "La generación estudiantil del año de 28," in *Gómez, Gomecismo y Antigomecismo*, 12. Sympathy for the students reflected bourgeois opposition to Gomecista monopolies. Engert to DS, 7 March 1928, 831.00/1350, NARA, microcopy 366.

the true carrier of Bolívar's legacy. Increasingly, political legitimacy divorced from Bolivarian ideology became unimaginable.⁷⁵ This emergent ideological contest endowed the sign hanging from the Liberator's statue with an undeniable resonance. The simple placard signaled, as the students had, that Venezuelans did not passively accept the symbolic associations forged by official rhetoric, and that the issue of corruption could become an instrument with which to pry the Bolivarian mantle from Gómez's shoulders.

As the linchpin of Gomecista profiteering, the cattle and beef monopoly naturally became an arena of resistance to the regime. Arévalo Cedeño's transition from aggrieved cattle trader to rebel leader has already been mentioned, and his was presumably not a unique case. Such rebels may have been among the rustlers who stole cattle from Gómez's ranches—an inherently political theft, given the thieves' access to easier pickings elsewhere, and given their certain pursuit by local officials who dared not rest until they apprehended the culprits.⁷⁶ Sometimes the cattle monopoly played a role in provoking direct, violent action against the Gomecista clique. An assassination attempt against Eustoquio Gómez, the hated president of the state of Táchira and a cousin of the dictator, coincided with growing outrage against his efforts to assert complete control over the regional cattle trade and other enterprises.⁷⁷

The profiteering of José María García, one of Gómez's principal business partners and political allies, provoked a deadly riot in the city of Maracaibo, the capital of the western state of Zulia. Appointed president of Zulia in 1914, García supervised Gómez's local investments in sugar and railroads, as well as the cattle business that the two owned in partnership with other officials to supply Maracaibo with beef.⁷⁸ The people of Maracaibo came to hate García "because of the numerous monopolies, severe taxation, gambling concessions, etc., from which he was supposed to derive a private revenue of some \$800 a day."⁷⁹ The city rejoiced when, in 1916, Gómez recalled García to Caracas and Alberto Aranguren became acting state president. According to the U.S. consul in Maracaibo, "Aranguren, immediately upon entering on his duties,

75. Germán Carrera Damas, *El culto a Bolívar* (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1973).

76. Jurado to Gómez, 1 April 1914, in *Los hombres*, vol. 2, 77–8.

77. Emil Sauer, a U.S. consul, visited Táchira and reported on Eustoquio Gómez's abusive business tactics, especially "the beef, hide, and rum monopolies," in Sauer to DS, 31 March 1919, 831.00/898, NARA, microcopy 366. After an attempt on Eustoquio Gómez's life, Sauer indicated again that the unrest in Táchira derived from Gómez's monopolies. Sauer to DS, 3 May 1919, 831.00/905, *ibid.*

78. Linder, "Agriculture and Rural Society," 230–3; see also *Los hombres*, vol. 1, 345–73.

79. Donald (U.S. consul at Maracaibo) to DS, 6 June 1916, 831.00/773, NARA, microcopy 366. All quotations in this paragraph are taken from this source.

did away with these objectionable taxes and monopolies and even started the paving of streets with concrete, which so pleased the people that voluntary contributions poured in to help the good work." Aranguren, while curbing graft, increased investment in public improvements. García's imminent return caused a wave of unrest and "even open threats to kill him." The despised executive arrived in the port under armed guard, but an angry crowd gathered nonetheless and someone opened fire at García with a pistol. "Little Nero," as the people called him, escaped unharmed, but in the ensuing gun battle ten people—two of them soldiers—were killed and twenty-five wounded. García continued as state president, but without much pretense of popular support.

Occasionally, protests against the regime's systematic profiteering forced modifications in the terms of domination, signaling the kind of give-and-take that historians have called the "negotiation of rule."⁸⁰ Gómez even proved flexible in his management of the cattle monopoly. In the early 1920s, at the height of the postwar depression in the cattle industry, an alliance of Venezuelan bankers, merchants and ranchers, as well as a British cattle company with holdings in Venezuela, petitioned the government to lower or reduce the taxes on the cattle industry.⁸¹ Selective enforcement of these levies, especially the transit tax on cattle crossing state borders, had long constituted a cornerstone of the Gomecista monopoly. In response to these petitions, Gómez made several highly publicized moves ostensibly intended to free the cattle trade. Upon reassuming the presidency in 1922, he directed state presidents in the *llanos* to end the transit tax. Some taxes were lowered or eliminated, meat prices in Caracas dropped by 50%, and it was speculated that Gómez might actually end his control of cattle markets.⁸² But states and municipalities kept certain cattle taxes in place. Some observers suspected that, despite the public posturing, Gómez must have secretly instructed officials to retain some taxes.⁸³ Whatever the reason, the reduced cattle taxes remained in place.⁸⁴ Cattle dealers operating outside Gómez's network could at least survive, if not prosper.

80. For a theoretical discussion of "the negotiation of rule"—a concept widely used in current historiography—see Gilbert Joseph and Daniel Nugent, "Popular Culture and State Formation in Revolutionary Mexico," in Joseph and Nugent, eds., *Everyday Forms of State Formation*, 3–23.

81. "Venezuela Annual Report, 1922," pp. 7–8, PRO, FO 371/8530; Galavis to Gómez, 13 June 1922, *BAHM* no. 60 (1969):203–4; Beak to Minister of Development (Fomento), 20 July 1922, *ibid.*, 205–8; and correspondence enclosed with Beak to Beaumont, 27 Feb. 1923, PRO, FO 199/ 219.

82. Beaumont to Balfour, 13 July 1922, PRO, FO 199/188; and "Venezuela, Annual Report, 1922," pp. 7–8, PRO, FO 371/8530.

83. Beaumont to Curzon, 26 May 1923, PRO, FO 199/188.

84. "Memorandum on the present Conditions, Economic and Commercial, in Venezuela," enclosed in Keeling to Simon, 2 March 1934, PRO, FO 371/17618.

The give-and-take between the regime and society at times extended to the way that Gómez rotated state presidents from region to region. Communities that dared to protest against an especially abusive president could sometimes win a more lenient successor as their next state executive. General Silverio González presided over a particularly corrupt and abusive administration in the eastern state of Sucre from 1915 to 1921. *Jefes civiles* in rural Sucre regularly extorted money from plantation owners by threatening to drag their laborers into the army, while the police in Cumaná (Sucre's capital) imposed petty "fines" on merchants who failed to display the national flag on specified holidays.⁸⁵ When Gómez removed González from office, the former executive and his allies became the targets of popular retribution on the streets of Cumaná. A mob gathered outside González's home, yelling insults, and only dispersed when he brandished a pistol. Removed from office at the same time as González was Cumaná *jefe civil* Clemente Soto, dubbed "The Hand that Squeezes" because of his innovative methods of extorting money. When Soto, deprived of protection, attempted to leave the city, Cumaná's taxi drivers turned the tables by charging him inflated fees and then throwing him out of their taxis after driving only a few blocks towards his destination.⁸⁶

Upon removing González and his cohorts, Gómez appointed Juan Alberto Ramírez as president of Sucre "to soothe the spirits of the *cumaneses* [residents of Cumaná] upset by the arbitrary acts of González."⁸⁷ The tumultuous demonstrations of approval that welcomed Ramírez constituted a popular repudiation of González more than a sincere welcome for the new, and still unknown, appointee. Gómez's choice of Ramírez, who became known as one of the regime's most upright and conciliatory state presidents, was clearly calculated to grant the outraged people of Sucre a change from the treatment experienced under González. Upon arriving, Ramírez warned officials against continuing the extortions of the previous administration with the admonition, "Look what happened to González because of these things."⁸⁸ In 1925 Ramírez undertook a similar mission of reconciliation when he replaced Eustoquio Gómez as president of Táchira, ending the most abusive rule suffered by any state during the dictatorship.

Popular protest modified rather than transformed the dynamics of the regime. Resistance to profiteering could win a temporary reprieve for an exploited region, could loosen the Gomecista cattle monopoly at

85. Brett to DS, 23 Sept. 1915, 831.00/753, NARA, microcopy 366; and Parada, *De Ocumare*, 74.

86. Parada, *De Ocumare*, 68–9.

87. *Ibid.*, 84.

88. *Ibid.*, 73–5.

the margins, or could publicly ridicule the Bolivarian pretensions of the dictator. But opposition to profiteering never altered the fundamental character of the regime, nor did it seriously threaten Gómez's continuation in power. Indeed, by dramatizing the popular wrath that seethed beneath the superficial peace imposed by the dictatorship, occasional resistance probably fortified the regime by discouraging any permanent breach between Gómez and his occasionally restless collaborators. Periodically reminded that offended citizens would seize any opportunity for revenge against the officials who gouged them, Gomecistas had ample motivation to minimize their differences and present a united front against the waiting masses.

THE NEW REGIME AND THE NEGOTIATION OF RULE

In the end, the Venezuelan people had to wait until Gómez's death to claim their full measure of revenge. The protests that exploded across much of Venezuela in late 1935 and early 1936 provided the final, and perhaps most successful, episode in the history of Venezuelans' attempt to end the systematic, unbridled profiteering which had defined the Gomecista regime. Undoubtedly, anger over profiteering, as much as a desire for political democracy, motivated Venezuelans who attacked Gomecista officials and their property after the dictator's demise.

Within days of Gómez's death on 17 December 1935, mobs in Caracas attacked the homes and businesses of prominent Gomecistas. The rioters demonstrated obvious discipline, limiting themselves to assaults on properties somehow linked to the regime, making clear their political intent. Even British diplomats praised the crowds' restraint and selectivity.⁸⁹ Amid calls for a free market in meats, crowds systematically sacked the retail shops of the beef company established by Gómez and his chief collaborators less than two years before.⁹⁰ Meanwhile, the protests spread far beyond Caracas. In the port cities of La Guaira and Puerto Cabello, crowds followed the *Caraqueños'* example and looted the properties of known Gomecistas. The General's cattle estates in the *llanos* suffered vigorous attacks. Peasants in Crespo district retaliated for Gomecistas' appropriation of public lands by attacking haciendas, burning fences, and murdering one of the largest landowners in the district. In sum, much of the popular fury that exploded in late 1935 and early 1936 was intended as retribution against Gomecista corruption.⁹¹

89. MacGregor to Eden, 24 Dec. 1935, PRO, FO 371/19845.

90. Nicholson to DS, 30 Dec. 1935, 831.00/1557, Box 5785, Record Group 59, NA.

91. MacGregor to Eden, 2 Jan. 1936, PRO, FO 371/19845; Pitaluga to López Contreras, 25 Dec. 1935, in Eleazar López Contreras, *Proceso político social, 1928–1936*, 2d ed. (Caracas: Editorial Ancora, 1955), 103; Yarrington, *A Coffee Frontier*, 181–92.

These protests clearly influenced the government led by General Eleazar López Contreras, Gómez's Minister of War and successor as president. Considered personally honest, despite having served and admired Gómez for many years, he recognized the legitimate grievances created by Gomecista profiteering. López's adherents easily defeated a gangster-like grab for power by Eustoquio Gómez, the leader of the most abusive and corrupt wing of the official faction. López gained additional popularity by dismantling some of the most notorious Gomecista rackets. As the U.S. minister reported, "General López Contreras's popularity continues. The cancellation of several monopolies has done much to enhance the belief that he is firm in his intention to furnish honest government."⁹² López also moved to cut profiteering in the military, which led to grumbling among officers not accustomed to living on their official salaries alone.⁹³

The fate of Gómez's fortune proved a more difficult issue for López. Public opinion called for the government to confiscate Gómez's fortune, but López, admiring the late dictator, balked at an action that would openly label Gómez as corrupt.⁹⁴ Initially, he declared that anyone with a financial claim against the dictator should pursue the matter through the courts. Still, the press and public called for the confiscation of all Gómez's property. Some saw the issue as symbolic, a test of López's commitment to break with the past.⁹⁵ Finally, López relented and allowed the confiscation of the General's entire fortune, which the national congress approved in September 1936.⁹⁶

Symbolically, then, the nation joined in repudiating the corruption of the past. Moreover, the boundaries of the state's power over society shifted under López. The systematic profiteering of the Gómez period—defined by forced sales, monopolies supported by state power, and the seizure of property belonging to those out of favor with the ruling clique—did not survive into the new era. To be sure, corruption continued under López as rising oil revenues multiplied the opportunities to divert public funds to private use. But the daily, degrading, coercive extraction of resources directly from the populace, backed ultimately by the threat of imprisonment or worse, ceased to provide the central logic of the Venezuelan state. The protests that followed Gómez's death had accomplished at least a partial shift in the demarcation of state power over society.

92. Nicholson to DS, 30 Dec. 1935, 831.00/1557, Box 5785, Record Group 59, NA.

93. MacGregor to Eden, 11 Feb. 1936, PRO, FO 371/19845.

94. MacGregor to Eden (with enclosed newspaper article), 24 Jan. 1936, PRO, FO 371/19845.

95. Nicholson to DS, 28 Jan. 1936, 831.00/1572, Record Group 59, Box 5785, NA.

96. The confiscation decrees are reproduced in Dupuy, *Propiedades*, 147–9.

CONCLUSION

This essay has argued that a focus on the systematic profiteering of Gomecista officials offers a valuable window through which to view the process of state formation in early twentieth-century Venezuela. Profiteering required the cooperation of officials up and down the political hierarchy and led to the creation of business partnerships between Gómez and officials throughout the country, strengthening bonds among them. In some cases (such as the cattle cartel) these partnerships could last for years and serve as the basis for ongoing enterprises of production and exchange. In other instances (such as the confiscations in Los Caños), such alliances served as vehicles for the outright seizure of property from entrepreneurs who could not claim the regime's protection. Whatever their nature, these alliances operated according to an etiquette of corruption which dictated that the spoils of all enterprises be widely distributed. Political power underwrote these various enterprises to such an extent that, for many Venezuelans, the construction of a centralized state under Gómez must have seemed indistinguishable from the construction of an integrated, nation-wide system of profiteering.⁹⁷

Analyzing the Gomecista regime as a business enterprise has the advantage of directing our attention towards the relationship between the state and society, a neglected area in most studies of Venezuelan state formation during this period. Interpretations emphasizing oil, international diplomacy, military professionalization, or reform of the treasury reveal little about how state power was made concrete in the lives of most Venezuelans, or about their attempts to shape the boundaries of state power. Gomecista profiteering provided the primary arena for many citizens' experience of the centralizing state. The regime's ability to transform commonplace economic transactions into acts of submission infused society with the sense of a consolidated state, secure in its power.

But if profiteering advanced state power—cementing Gomecista alliances and normalizing popular submission—it simultaneously provoked acts of protest that ranged from humiliating public satire to violent rebellion. Popular resistance at times modified the system of domination under Gómez, but only the protests against profiteering that broke out after his death triggered a more dramatic shift in the relationship between Venezuelans and the state. Today, the Gómez regime stands as a unique period in the nation's history. This twenty-seven-year era bore the indelible mark of the grasping, upwardly mobile rancher, who, in his own words, was “always thinking of cattle deals.”

97. Corruption and “the imagined state” in India are discussed in Gupta, “Blurred Boundaries,” 389–92.