

The intelligentsia's two visions of urban modernity: Gómez's Caracas, 1908–35

ARTURO ALMANDOZ *

Departamento de Planificación Urbana, Universidad Simón Bolívar,
Caracas 1086, Venezuela 89000

ABSTRACT: This article focuses on the disparity between two urban reports of the Gómez regime (1908–35). Relying on the theoretical platform provided by European positivism, there is, on the one hand, the erudite ideologists' justification of the material achievements of the dictatorship. On the other hand, there is the critique present in the literary characters of the works written by the young political class, where the parochialism of Caracas served as an excuse to attack the social abuses and cultural obscurity of one of Latin America's longest dictatorships.

Juan Vicente Gómez's dictatorship in Venezuela can be compared in some aspects to other regimes in Latin America, such as Porfirio Díaz's (1876–1910) in Mexico, and Augusto Leguía's (1908–12, 1919–30) in Peru. In each of those cases, the modernizing projects depended on strong internal control and close collaboration with foreign capital. This often involved a suppression of the nationalist critics and opponents in general, who were forced into exile. In terms of urban modernization there were tensions and contradictions in the ways in which 'progress' and 'civilization' were understood by two different social strata: on the one hand, the 'scientists', 'doctors' or ideologists linked to power; on the other, the young political bloc composed of the middle and working classes that had emerged as a result of new industrial and commercial activities which had demanded a significant amount of rural to urban migration beginning in the late nineteenth century.¹ However, in spite of the opposition's complaints, both Díaz and Leguía sponsored certain bourgeois transformations of the country and its capitals, bringing in American technology that made possible the improvement of the sanitary and communication infrastructure, as well as the emergence of a

* An early version of this article was presented at the Urban History Group Conference, Oxford, Mar. 1999.

¹ As has been illustrated for the case of Lima by P. Elmore, 'Lima: puertas a la modernidad. Modernización y experiencia urbana a principios de siglo', *Cuadernos Americanos*, 30 (1991), 104–23; D. Parker, 'Los pobres de la clase media', in A. Panfichi and F. Portocarrero (eds), *Mundos Interiores: Lima 1850–1950* (Lima, 1995), 161–85.

new urban culture.² Both aspects have been discussed by Venezuela's intelligentsia in relation to Gómez's Caracas, and one examined here from two different perspectives.

From the beginning of his 27-year dictatorship, General Gómez endeavoured to avoid the history of blockades by Europe and quarrels with the United States that had plagued the bankrupt government of General Cipriano Castro (1899–1908). The latter had appointed Gómez his 'compadre' (his children's godfather) and comrade to replace him in power while he was operated on in Berlin – a replacement which turned out to be one of Latin America's longest dictatorships (Figure 1). A former rancher and landowner from the Andes who had come to Caracas with Castro's 'Revolución Restauradora' in 1899, Gómez applied his austere and thrifty discipline to the management of his new national 'hacienda' (ranch). In this respect, one of the main goals of his administration was to improve the Venezuelan economy by reducing the international debts which had risen continuously from the time of the War of Independence. To the amazement of his creditors, Gómez was able to start paying some of his predecessors' commitments by the early 1910s.³ Because of this, the rekindled relationship with Woodrow Wilson's administration was not jeopardized when Gómez, an admirer of the Germans, decided not to break Venezuela's neutrality in the First World War, despite American pressures.⁴

Gómez's neutrality proved to be right for boosting the Venezuelan economy during the conflict – a major achievement made easier by the increase of prices of raw materials and the discovery and exploitation of petroleum in the previously agrarian country. The black gold thereafter fuelled the last episodes of the superpowers' long-lasting battle for controlling the Venezuelan economy, which had become an arena of vital importance for the North Atlantic bloc by the 1920s.⁵ Besides the allotment of oil concessions and the final payment of the debt by the 1920s, the Gómez administration exhibited other credentials for Venezuela's definitive incorporation in North Atlantic trade and its internal structuring as a capitalistic economy. The invitation to foreign investors to come back to the country, the re-establishment of commercial relationships with Castro's creditors, the tax concessions to foreign companies and the enlargement of an internal market enriched by the

² D. Parker, 'Civilizing the city of kings: hygiene and housing in Lima, Peru', in R. Pineo and J. Baer (eds), *Cities of Hope. Peoples, Protests, and Progress in Urbanizing Latin America, 1870–1930* (Boulder, 1998), 153–77. For Mexico City, see M. Johns, *The City of México in the Age of Díaz* (Austin, 1997); M. Tenorio-Trillo, *México at the World's Fairs. Crafting a Nation* (Berkeley, 1996).

³ E. Pino, *Venezuela metida en cintura* (Caracas, 1988), 45.

⁴ M. Caballero, *Gómez, el tirano liberal* (Caracas, 1994), 164–9.

⁵ B.S. McBeth, *Juan Vicente Gómez and the Oil Companies in Venezuela, 1908–1935* (Cambridge, 1983), 3, 110.



Figure 1: Castro (left) and Gómez, 1900. From R.J. Velásquez, *Confidencias imaginarias de Juan Vicente Gómez* (Caracas, 1979)

black gold characterized the economic scene of Gómez's booming Venezuela.⁶ With great enthusiasm, the American Commissioner to Venezuela, Purl Lord Bell, had reported some of these breakthroughs to the Department of Commerce in the early post-war years, which had 'given the country new commercial life and stimulus . . .

⁶ J. Lombardi, *Venezuela. The Search of Order, The Dream of Progress* (New York, 1982), 213–14.

Venezuela may be termed one of the most advanced Latin American countries'.⁷

Still by 1922, the British companies' early advantage in Venezuela's oil-producing economy was recognized by Bell: 'At the present time British interests strongly predominate. Of the 12 oil companies holding property in Venezuela, at least 7 are under British control, in most cases through the Royal Dutch Shell'.⁸ But Gómez's concessions for oil exploitation ended up favouring the American companies, which took the lead by the mid-1930s.⁹ After all, the energetic Americans who came to live in the oil camps were very much like those tireless Germans whom Gómez had so much admired in the business life of the Andes and Maracaibo.¹⁰ On these grounds, American investments in Venezuela amounted to 162 million dollars by 1928 – in contrast to 3 million in 1912.¹¹ Such an affluence of capital has been regarded as Venezuela's final entrance into the domain of North American neocolonialism, after the long retreat of European countries at the beginning of the century.¹²

Venezuela not only underwent the transformation from a ranching into an oil-exporting economy, but also from a country of countless revolutions and civil wars into the subdued 'pays de Gómez' visited by Jean-Louis Lapeyre in the 1930s. Having spent three years in the court of the 'Benemérito' (Well-deserving), the French biographer could confirm how the 'popular and democratic Caesar' had enabled Venezuela to escape from the 'internal quarrels which had plagued it and prevented it from reaching a place among the nations of advanced civilization'.¹³ A similar impression had been made on a fellow traveller Georges Lafond, who thought General Gómez was 'the most remarkable personality of the American continent', despite 'the often draconian measures that he had employed for reaching the result fully met' by the mid-1920s.¹⁴ Among other means of repression, these draconian measures included hundreds of shackled prisoners who suffered medieval-like tortures in the dungeons of the despotic regime, which was labelled by its opponents as the 'shame' of the Americas.¹⁵

⁷ P.L. Bell, *Venezuela. A Commercial and Industrial Handbook. With a chapter on the Dutch West Indies* (Washington, 1922), 30.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 94–5.

⁹ R. Betancourt, *Venezuela: Política y Petróleo* (Mexico City, 1956), 25–44.

¹⁰ R.J. Velásquez, *Confidencias imaginarias de Juan Vicente Gómez* (Caracas, 1979), 231–4.

¹¹ I. Rodríguez, 'Perfil de la economía venezolana durante el régimen gomecista', in E. Pino (ed.), *Juan Vicente Gómez y su época* (Caracas, 1993), 87–90.

¹² F. Brito, *Historia Económica y Social de Venezuela* (Caracas, 1966), vol. 2, 359–426; G. Carrera, *Formulación definitiva del proyecto nacional 1870–1900* (Caracas, 1988), 109; F. Toro, 'Juan Vicente Gómez: las relaciones internacionales', in Pino, *Juan Vicente Gómez y su época*, 253–4.

¹³ J.-L. Lapeyre, *Au pays de Gómez, pacificateur du Vénézuéla* (Paris, 1937), 72.

¹⁴ G. Lafond, *L'Amérique du Sud. Vénézuéla. Guyanes. Paraguay. Uruguay* (Paris, 1927), 27–8.

¹⁵ J.R. Pocater, *Memorias de un venezolano de la decadencia* (Caracas, 1966; 1st ed. 1927), vol. 3.

In view of such contradictory reports, this article aims at focusing on the disparity between two urban visions of the Gómez era, held by two groups of the Venezuelan intelligentsia who played different roles in the urban culture of that period. What is explored here relates to ongoing research on the city and civilization in Venezuelan thought of the twentieth century. On the one hand, the erudite ideologists' justification of the regime in terms of its material achievements, keeping in mind Venezuela's previous anarchy, relied on the historical and methodological platform provided by European positivism. On the other hand, the critique expressed by the literary characters created by the young political intellectuals, that developed mainly in novels where the parochialism of the Venezuelan capital served as an excuse to attack the political abuses and cultural obscurity of a dictatorship which supposedly delayed the actual incorporation of the country into twentieth-century modernity. There lies an urban paradox brought forth by two visions, whose different reports of modernity in the Gómez era are due to their particular relationships with the Establishment, as well as the domain of the urban progress they refer to.

The positivists' version: order, progress and infrastructure

Apart from gaols and repression, the dictatorial machinery of the so-called 'pacifier of Venezuela' also relied upon the pseudo-positivistic interpretation of the country's turbulent history, carried out by the erudite intellectuals who served the illiterate Caesar. After the first representatives of the movement in the 1880s, the second and third generations of Venezuelan positivism included thinkers with different backgrounds in natural and social sciences.¹⁶ Among those associated with the Gómez regime were Luis Razetti, who had studied in the 1890s in Paris, and from then on divulged Europe's biological evolutionism and hygienic findings in Venezuelan society, and the lawyers and historians Pedro M. Arcaya, José Gil Fortoul and Laureano Vallenilla Lanz, who had studied or lived abroad as diplomats.¹⁷

Unlike European positivism, which was a science, Venezuelan 'positivism' was, as in the rest of Latin America, a hybrid method of analysis drawn from Darwin's evolutionism, which combined the Comte school's opposition to metaphysics with Spencer's social evolutionism.¹⁸ In their early view of the city, some works of Latin American 'positivism' incorporated elements drawn from economic liberalism, in order to

¹⁶ L.B. Guerrero, *Introducción al positivismo venezolano* (Caracas, 1956), 15–20.

¹⁷ In relation to the thinkers' backgrounds, see R. Archila, *Luis Razetti o Biografía de la Superación* (Caracas, 1952); A.L. Alvarado (ed.), *Epistolario de Gil Fortoul a Lisandro Alvarado* (Caracas, 1956); T. Polanco, *Gil Fortoul: Una luz en la sombra* (Caracas, 1983).

¹⁸ See for instance E. Bradford, 'Cultures in conflict: the implication of modernization in nineteenth-century Latin America', in V. Bernhard (ed.), *Elites, Masses and Modernization in Latin America, 1850–1930* (Austin, 1979), 15–17.

criticize the growing capitals for not fully assimilating the influence of capitalism and modernization. This was the case, for instance, of the Colombian Miguel Samper's *La Miseria en Bogotá* (1867) and *Retrospecto* (1896), the Peruvian Joarquín Capelo's *Sociología de Lima* (1895–1902) and the Argentine Juan A. García's *La ciudad indiana* (1900).¹⁹ In the Venezuelan case, instead of focusing on the urban analysis, the new method was used with some delay by the Gómez thinkers for answering fundamental questions about the evolution of Venezuelan society and its transition into modernity.²⁰

A sociological and political answer for those questions was provided by Vallenilla Lanz's *Cesarismo Democrático* (1919). This turned out to be a sort of best-seller for Latin American dictators of the period. Based on Spencer's idea of the 'military chief', on Taine's concept of 'gendarme', and on Coulanges' review of the Greek tyrant, the former student of the Sorbonne and the College de France proposed the concept of a 'Gendarme Necesario' (Necessary Gendarme), as a new type of 'caudillo' (regional leader) who was supposed to overcome the political traumas of most of the unsettled republics of Latin America.²¹ According to Vallenilla's own version of the stages of 'mechanical' and 'organic' solidarity distinguished by René Worms and Émile Durkheim, the 'Democratic Caesar' was also necessary for achieving the integration of the regional peoples into an organic society.²² When replying later to one of the critics of his book, the sociologist finally unveiled his advocacy for General Gómez as a 'Good Tyrant' – another concept taken from Ernest Renan – claiming that the former's achievements in terms of economic development and European immigration, roads and sanitation, paved the way for Venezuela's transformation into a prosperous and structural nation.²³

Indeed, most of Gómez's policies gave answer to the questions and claims of Venezuelan positivists from the late nineteenth century onwards. One of these early issues was the relationship between race, progress and civilization, which had been articulated in liberal terms since the 1890s by Gil Fortoul, another intellectual godfather of the Gómez regime. On the basis of Haeckel's distinction of the 'Homo Americanus' and the 'Homo Mediterraneus' among other species of the human genre, combined with Simmel's idea of social differentiation, Gil Fortoul had recognized the existence of different 'social races', such as

¹⁹ R.M. Morse, 'Los intelectuales latinoamericanos y la ciudad', in J.E. Hardoy, R.M. Morse and R.P. Schaedel (eds), *Ensayos histórico-sociales sobre la urbanización en América Latina* (Buenos Aires, 1978), 91–112.

²⁰ A. Mieres, *Ideas positivistas en Gil Fortoul y su historia* (Caracas, 1981), 18, 30, 250; E. Plaza, *José Gil Fortoul. Los nuevos caminos de la razón: la historia como ciencia. 1861–1943* (Caracas, 1985), vol. 1, 35–44; N. Harwich, 'Introduction' to L. Vallenilla Lanz, *Cesarismo Democrático y otros textos*, ed. N. Harwich (Caracas, 1991), xvi.

²¹ L. Vallenilla Lanz, *Cesarismo Democrático. Estudios sobre las bases sociológicas de la constitución efectiva de Venezuela* (Caracas, 1994), 165, 222–3.

²² *Ibid.*, 254–5, 260.

²³ *Ibid.*, 272–3.

the English and the Spanish. The Venezuelan sociologist denied that the Spanish heritage was the only factor to blame for the economic, political and moral disarray of Latin America – as Gustave Le Bon had suggested by contrast to the successful example of the United States. But Gil Fortoul, at the same time, considered that the question could and should be solved in sociological and not in political terms, as other Latin intellectuals had tried to do in the 1890s – when territorial disputes between Venezuela and the British Empire facilitated the consolidation of North American influence in the Caribbean. Since the ‘national race’ of Venezuela had inherited the same lack of industriousness as the Spanish one, Gil claimed that it was necessary to boost the influence of ‘more civilized people’ from Europe, in order to lead the tropical nation along the path of industrial prosperity.²⁴ With his concern for the immigrants’ influence on race, progress and civilization, the Venezuelan sociologist thus echoed the ideas of social evolutionism pioneered by Spencer’s works, which had triggered off a European debate witnessed by Gil while acting as consul in Bordeaux, Hamburg, Liverpool, Paris and Berne from 1886 to 1898.

Another contribution to the debate about race, progress and civilization had been made in the late nineteenth century by Arcaya, whose approach to the problem of North American imperialism had demanded the Latin Americans’ contrition before going on with the critique of McKinley’s expansionism.²⁵ Following the fact-based methodology of the analysis of Spencer and Taine, in 1899 the Venezuelan sociologist and lawyer had pointed out that the Yankees’ growing predominance on the continent was made possible by the mistakes of the young republics.²⁶ Having become familiar with Le Bon’s distinctions between races according to their level of civilization, Arcaya adopted the former’s belief that behind every nation’s culture can be found moral and intellectual characteristics which are epitomized in ‘popular spirits’, a conclusion reached even before Gómez’s rise to power.²⁷

After collaborating many times with the Gómez administration, Arcaya not only recognized that the Andean caudillo was necessary for subduing the internal turmoil of Venezuela, but also pointed out that his totalitarianism was not very different from what happened as an aftermath of the First World War in Europe. Even after Gómez’s death, the Venezuelan Ambassador opposed the foreigners’ radical critique of the

²⁴ J. Gil Fortoul, *Obras Completas* (Caracas, 1956), vol. 4, 338–9, 342–7.

²⁵ This critique reached its peak after the annexation of Cuba and Puerto Rico in 1898 by William McKinley’s government. In the mid-1890s the American administration had also to intervene in the affair over a long-disputed strip of territory in Guiana, which had caused the rupture of diplomatic relations between the United Kingdom and Venezuela since 1887.

²⁶ P.M. Arcaya, *Personajes y hechos de la historia de Venezuela* (Caracas, 1977), 107.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 159–62, 193; P.M. Arcaya, *Críticas de sinceridad y exactitud* (Caracas, 1921), 273–4, 290–1; idem, *Estudios de sociología venezolana* (Caracas, 1941), 252.

dictatorship that came to be epitomized in Thomas Rourke's virulent biography of the 'Tyrant of the Andes', where the economic achievements of the 'lucky' dictator were wiped out by comparison with his horrendous crimes.²⁸ Looking for an answer in his 70,000-volume library, Arcaya had then to call upon one of the heroes of Roman Antiquity in order to match the merits of the 'Founder of Peace'. He referred to Scipio Africanus – the general who conquered and destroyed Carthage, and was about to be tried on minor charges. As his sole defence, Scipio took the Romans to the temple in order to thank the gods again for his past prowess in Africa.

Following his example, General Gómez might have said to the Venezuelans, before whom he was accused, 'Let us travel over the Republic by automobile, over the highways which I have opened, and return to the National Pantheon to give thanks to God before the tomb of Bolívar, because civil wars have ceased in our land, which he liberated, and because the debts of the nation have been paid', Arcaya retorted.²⁹

In terms of infrastructure, from the beginning of his regime, Gómez's shift towards a more progressive model was made evident in his policy of public works, which took over from the predominance of ornamentation in previous administrations. A decree issued by the new president on 25 June 1910, established that 50 per cent of the budget of the Ministry of Public Works (MOP) should be invested in public roads. With the approval of the experts gathered at the 1911 Congress of Municipalities – organized by Razetti – communication and sanitation were endorsed as the new governmental priorities in terms of public works.³⁰ Since the late nineteenth century, Razetti not only had commented in newspapers and journals on the evolutionism of Darwin and Haeckel, but also deciphered the findings of Pasteur, Koch and other fathers of modern bacteriology, thus making a significant contribution to the shaping of a new conscience about hygiene in the society of Caracas, that ultimately led to the first legal reforms in this respect.³¹ Throughout the Gómez administration, Razetti also championed a crusade aimed at committing the private sector to the field of social hygiene, and urged the government to assume the great works of sanitation for Caracas.³²

In the years to come, progress was certainly pursued through the growing investment in communication and sanitation, a good deal of which was managed through the MOP budget. Representing less than 10 per cent of the national expenditure in the early years of the Gómez

²⁸ T. Rourke, *Tyrant of the Andes. The Life of Juan Vicente Gómez* (Chur, 1969; 1st pub. London, 1937).

²⁹ P.M. Arcaya, *The Gómez Regime in Venezuela and its Background* (Washington, 1936), 225.

³⁰ *Actas y Conclusiones del Primer Congreso de Municipalidades* (Caracas, 1911), 46–7, 107–11.

³¹ L. Razetti, *Obras Completas* (Caracas, 1952), vol. 2; A. Almandoz, *Urbanismo europeo en Caracas (1870–1940)* (Caracas, 1997), 175–91.

³² Razetti, *Obras Completas*, vol. 2, 171, 595–606.



Figure 2: Gómez inspecting public works on 19 April 1933 in the capital. From G.J. Schael, *Caracas de siglo a siglo* (Caracas, 1966)

administration, the MOP budget consumed from between 10 and 20 per cent of the national one from 1915 until the mid-1920s, when the payment of international debts paved the way for public works to absorb between 20 and 30 per cent of the national expenditure until the early 1930s (Figure 2).³³ By that time when Venezuela claimed to be the world's first exporter and second producer of petroleum, national expenditure fluctuated between 150 and 250 million dollars.³⁴ From the political perspective, investment in public works was highly convenient for the dictatorship's centralism: all means of communication – from telegraph to roads – had to be welcomed by a regime eager to control a

³³ C. Caraballo, *Obras Públicas, Fiestas y Mensajes (Un Puntal del Régimen Gomecista)* (Caracas, 1981), 39; J.J. Martín, *Planes, planos y proyectos para Venezuela: 1908–1958 (Apuntes para una historia de la construcción del país)* (Caracas, 1994), 267–78.

³⁴ Rodríguez, 'Perfil de la economía venezolana durante el régimen gomecista', 90, 105; Rourke, *Tyrant of the Andes*, 313.

vast territory which had hidden many a revolution in the past.³⁵ In this respect, several of the highway projects were undertaken for the sake of political control, more than real economic demands.³⁶

The overwhelming evidence of those achievements probably contributed to the fact that the dictator died unchallenged in 1935 – despite some political unrest which reached its peak in the Caracas students' revolts of 1928. Taking advantage of Venezuela's suicidal past of civil wars and upheavals, Gómez's intellectuals obviously had forced the thesis of their beloved European masters, in order to justify the harsh dictatorship.³⁷ Nevertheless, the costly loan from positivism had made possible twenty-seven years of 'Union, Peace and Work' – a slogan which proved to be important for the modern evolution of Venezuela and the rest of the continent.³⁸ In terms of infrastructure, Gómez's roads and sanitation programme proved to be more effective than the attempts of previous administrations – which had come to be a symbol of the bankrupt Venezuela blockaded by European powers in the early 1900s. In ideological terms, the exegesis of the fathers of modern sociology by their Venezuelan counterparts was a necessary attempt to embrace and divulge among the Gómez bourgeoisie the categories and values of a 'modern' or 'industrial' society, as it was to be defined by later urban sociology.³⁹ All in all, the Venezuelan positivists' vision of modernity in terms of Order, Progress and Infrastructure was valid in relation to the country – but not in relation to the capital and its urban culture.

Gómez's Caracas: between rebuff and recovery

Though captivating the American visitors from the late nineteenth century – when Richard H. Davis said to have arrived at 'the Paris of South America'⁴⁰ – the Frenchified ethos of *belle époque* Caracas was not attractive for Gómez, who always remained nostalgic for life in the

³⁵ As has been pointed out by Velásquez, *Confidencias imaginarias de Juan Vicente Gómez*, 292–4.

³⁶ J. Ríos and G. Carvallo, *Análisis histórico de la organización del espacio en Venezuela* (Caracas, 1990), 131–2.

³⁷ J.R. Luna, *El positivismo en la historia del pensamiento venezolano* (Caracas, 1971), 91, 103; E. Pino, *Positivismo y gomecismo* (Caracas, 1978), 57–64; idem, 'Ideas sobre un pueblo inepto: la justificación del gomecismo', in Pino, *Juan Vicente Gómez y su época*, 187–201.

³⁸ C. Griffin, *The National Period in the History of the New World. An Outline and Commentary* (Mexico City, 1961), 143; Lombardi, *Venezuela*, 207.

³⁹ See for instance R. Park, 'Suggestions for investigation of human behavior in the urban environment', in idem, *The City. Suggestions for Investigation of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment* (Chicago, 1984; 1st edn 1925), 1–46; L. Wirth, 'Urbanism as a way of life' (1938), in R. Sennett (ed.), *Classic Essays on the Culture of Cities* (New York, 1969), 143–63; G. Sjoberg, *The Preindustrial City. Past and Present* (New York, 1965), 1–24.

⁴⁰ R.H. Davis, *Three Gringos in Venezuela and Central America* (New York, 1896), 221, 237, 245–6. Also the American W.E. Curtis had labelled 1880s Caracas as 'a sort of one-storey Paris', in idem, *Venezuela. A Land Where It's Always Summer* (New York, 1896), 153, 168.

mountains.⁴¹ This original apprehension was overtaken by manifest antipathy as soon as he became president: though Caracas remained as the official capital, in April 1909 Gómez decided to move his headquarters to Maracay – a provincial town 110 kms from the capital. But the dictator could not prevent the ‘sun-baked town’ from soon becoming ‘a local Potsdam’, where the traveller Lady Dorothy Mills could confirm that Gómez’s entourage was worthy of a tropical Louis XIV.⁴²

Orchestrated by France, Europe still provided a great deal of the ethos of the late *belle époque* in Caracas; the Hispanic character of the city was enlivened by the Benemérito’s cult of Andalusian motifs – perhaps a reminiscence of his father, a Spanish immigrant. However, the replacement of the languid imagery of the ‘Bella Epoca’ was speeded up by the growing presence of North American novelties in the booming capital of the oil-exporting country. The emerging cult for the Yankee culture was fuelled by the Hollywood films screened in the ten cinemas and theatres of central Caracas,⁴³ where the public became as spellbound as Gómez was in his private cinema in Maracay. When the absorbed members of the audience put the new piece of chewing gum in their mouths and began to stammer out an English dotted with New York slang, the European refinement of the ‘Bella Epoca’ gave way to the American spell of the roaring twenties.⁴⁴ New York’s take-over from the European metropolises had been easier after the First World War, when the American Commissioner could proclaim the new cultural dependence of the Gómez elite:

The Mecca of the Venezuelan travellers is no longer Paris, London or Hamburg, but New York, and young men are being sent to the United States in increasing numbers for higher education and instruction in the sciences. Over half of the people of the better class that one meets in Venezuela are either talking about their recent trip to New York and the United States or are planning to go there in the near future for a tour, business, or education.⁴⁵

While those shifts occurred in relation to the cultural imagery of the Venezuelan elite, the demographic and economic changes which took place during the 27-year dictatorship also contributed to the dual perception of Gómez’s Caracas. With an estimated population of 92,212 by 1920, the city rebuffed by Gómez during the first part of the regime stayed far behind the major Latin American capitals, which had topped 100,000 by the turn of the century.⁴⁶ The demographic growth of Caracas

⁴¹ Rourke, *Tyrant of the Andes*, 55, 63; Velásquez, *Confidencias imaginarias de Juan Vicente Gómez*, 71.

⁴² Lady D. Mills, *The Country of the Orinoco* (London, 1930), 19, 22.

⁴³ I. De-Sola, *Contribución al Estudio de los Planos de Caracas* (Caracas, 1967), 127, 144.

⁴⁴ As has been described by the local chronicler P.J. Muñoz, *Imagen Afectiva de Caracas* (‘La Belle Epoca Caraqueña’) (Caracas, 1972), 9.

⁴⁵ Bell, *Venezuela*, 23–4.

⁴⁶ J.E. Hardoy, ‘Las ciudades de America Latina a partir de 1900’, in idem, *La ciudad hispanoamericana. El sueño de un orden* (Madrid, 1989), 267–8.

had been merely spontaneous, in an agriculture-oriented country with no real urban primacy, prior to the time when it was not yet flooded with significant waves of rural and international immigration. However, the capital of the oil-exporting country soon started to evince a demographic recovery. The population jumped to 135,253 by 1926, and the relative increase between 1920 and 1926 amounted to 39.48 per cent – a considerable change in relation to the 22.86 per cent growth experienced between 1891 and 1920.⁴⁷

By the 1920s, the new oil revenue and the payment of Venezuela's international debt paved the way for the Gómez administration to lift the so-called 'punishment of Caracas' – which had favoured investment in the province over the capital.⁴⁸ In terms of infrastructure, the distribution of electric lamp-posts in the streets was extended and regulated by the local government. With a new system of concrete sewers started in 1919, aqueducts being repaired and streets being paved, the conditions of the infrastructure started to be satisfactory for foreign investors.⁴⁹ But three pending questions – which were more than mere ameliorations on infrastructure – were to fill the urban agenda of Gómez's redeemed Caracas: traffic, urban sprawl and public housing. Partly as a response to the priority conferred on the means of communication by the Gómez administration, the number and diversity of motor vehicles grew considerably both in Caracas and nationwide. By the mid-1920s, in Caracas alone there were 1,067 licences for the 'chauffeurs' for over 1,000 private automobiles, plus 100 automobiles for hire. In addition, there were 816 licences for carriages, 158 for trams, 65 for public buses – which had appeared in 1912 – and 1,900 licences for carts.⁵⁰ The Gómez administration had more quickly to pass new instruments aimed at tackling the growing problems of Caracas traffic. Since 1913, countless regulations tried to control different aspects of circulation and transport; restrictions of the speed limits, establishment of signals and rules for circulation, and the ban on parking near some corners of the jammed centre confirmed how urgent and complex the traffic problem had become (Figure 3). Some dispositions of a 1933 by-law allow us to imagine the excessive congestion of the centre of Caracas: the first traffic wardens were entitled to enforce a maximum speed of 20 km/h in cars and 10 in motorcycles, in order to slow them down when approaching the corners – some of which had been rounded off since 1924.⁵¹

⁴⁷ *Quinto Censo de los Estados Unidos de Venezuela* (Caracas, 1926), vol. 3, 841; Ministerio de Fomento, *Sexto Censo Nacional 1936* (Caracas, 1939), vol. 1, 19.

⁴⁸ M. Negrón, 'La gestación del Plan Urbano de Caracas de 1939 y su incidencia en la formación de la tradición urbanística venezolana. Conversación con Leopoldo Martínez Olavarría', in idem, *El Plan Rotival. La Caracas que no fue* (Caracas, 1991), 147.

⁴⁹ Bell, *Venezuela*, 31, 121.

⁵⁰ G.J. Schael, *Apuntes para la historia. El automóvil en Venezuela* (Caracas, 1969), 199.

⁵¹ I have summarized countless ordinances published in the *Gaceta Municipal* by those years in Almandoz, *Urbanismo europeo en Caracas*, 234–7.



Figure 3: The San Jacinto corner, in Caracas city centre, 1910. From G.J. Schael, *Caracas de siglo a siglo* (Caracas, 1966)

While the traditional centre underwent densification of commerce and other services, private developers urbanized former ranches eastwards of the city – a concrete response to the necessity of upper- and middle-class groups to escape from central dwellings which had started to deteriorate.⁵² Since the mid-1890s, El Paraíso was the first bourgeois area which had emerged south-west of the traditional centre. This residential area was a former hacienda that had been bought by the developers of trams. But the south-west was not to be mainstream for the Caracas expansion. In an article published in 1912, in the newly created *Revista Técnica del Ministerio de Obras Públicas*, the engineer Carlos F. Linares discussed the problem of urban extension in the terms required by the new hygienic approach. The author considered that the irregular grounds towards the north and south-west of the valley were not appropriate for the extension of the capital, whereas the villages towards the east did satisfy the conditions in terms of quality of the ground, facilities for buildings, salubrity, sewers and water supply.⁵³ As a matter of fact, from the 1910s the automobile had allowed the Caracas upper classes to spend their summer holidays in 'country' houses in those eastern villages, while keeping their 'urban' residences in the centre of the city. But the extension towards the east was assumed by the private developers as a more permanent option from the early 1920s, with the passage of a decree favouring the enlargement of Caracas towards the east, between the Guaire river and the so-called 'Carretera del Este' (Eastern Highway).⁵⁴

By the 1920s, entrepreneurs like Luis Roche, Santiago Alfonzo Rivas and Juan Bernardo Arismendi undertook the construction of Maripérez, La Florida, El Recreo, Country Club, La Campiña, Campo Alegre, Los Palos Grandes, Los Chorros and Sebucán – all of them detached areas eastwards of the original centre. In the eclectic 'quintas' (villas) of these suburban 'urbanizaciones' (residential developments), a new group of architects who had studied abroad could experiment with the innovational eagerness of the prosperous bourgeoisie of the Gómez era. The Spaniard, Manuel Mujica Millán and Venezuelan Carlos Guinand Sandoz seduced their clients with 'neocolonial', 'neobaroque' and 'Basque' villas, as a chic re-creation of the so-called 'mission style' from California, while Cipriano Domínguez and Gustavo Wallis designed the first 'modern' cinemas and houses of Caracas, based on their tropical

⁵² E.J. Stann, 'Caracas, Venezuela, 1891–1936: a study of urban growth' (unpublished Vanderbilt University thesis, 1975), 177–87; A. Morales, R. Valery and M. Vallmitjana, *Estudio de Caracas. Evolución del patrón urbano desde la fundación de la ciudad hasta el período petrolero, 1567–1936* (Caracas, 1990), 49–52.

⁵³ C.F. Linares, 'Consideraciones del lugar hacia el cual debe extenderse la ciudad de Caracas', *Revista Técnica del Ministerio de Obras Públicas*, 15 (1912), 153–6.

⁵⁴ Decree of 19 April 1920, in Gobernación del Distrito Federal, *Memoria* (Caracas, 1921), 263–5.

version of the 'international style' and of 'architectural cubism'.⁵⁵ Mostly engineers linked to the MOP, these leading 'architects' were trained in Europe and the United States: Wallis had studied at the Universidad Central de Venezuela and obtained a specialization in architecture in the United States in 1923; Guinand had studied in the Technische Hochschule of München, and afterwards worked for two years in Paris before returning to Caracas in 1915; Domínguez had also studied engineering at the UCV and architecture in Paris between 1931 and 1933.

The private developers also tried to satisfy the housing necessities of the working class. By the mid-1920s, Roche, Arismendi and others designed popular urbanizations which were an extension of the traditional layout, such as Los Caobos (1924) and the 400-unit development of San Agustín del Norte (1925). At the same time, the unions which grouped the new contingents of urban workers became major customers for projects like the northern Nueva Caracas or the southern Prado de María, Los Cármenes and Los Jardines, which expanded the capital in different directions from those of the bourgeois east (Figure 4).⁵⁶ All these projects evinced the necessity of an official body which would sponsor the construction of low-cost housing for the growing demands of the working class in the booming capital. The Gómez administration's formal response came in a presidential law issued in June 1928 – the year of the students' massive and violent revolt. The Banco Obrero (Workers' Bank, BO) was thereupon provided with significant capital to be invested in loans to 'low-income workers' who intended to build 'urban dwellings'; official funds could also be spent on the construction of dwellings to be sold under a special hire purchase regime to those workers.⁵⁷ Because the original idea of José Ignacio Cárdenas – the MOP minister in 1927, who had been a diplomat in Holland and France between 1920 and 1925 – was to increase the MOP budget for public housing, the new bank came to function as an official lender.⁵⁸ Still, the BO soon attracted Roche, Arismendi and Rivas to the development of significant projects in popular areas of Caracas; between the late 1920s and the early 1930s alone, the bank funded 200 houses in San Agustín del Sur, 35 houses in Catia, 95 in Agua Salud and 72 in Los Jardines de El Valle.

The first official agency created in Latin America to face the problem of public housing, the BO thus represented definite proof of Gómez's partial revocation of the punishment of the capital, as well as a significant advance in the transformation of Venezuela's dictatorial

⁵⁵ G. Gasparini and J.P. Posani, *Caracas a través de su arquitectura* (Caracas, 1969), 302, 313–19; J.J. Pérez, 'Apuntes para la historia de la vivienda en la ciudad de Caracas en la primera mitad del siglo XX', *Urbana*, 16–17 (1995), 95–106.

⁵⁶ C. Di Pasquo, 'Caracas 1925–1935. Iniciativa privada y crecimiento urbano' (unpublished Universidad Central de Venezuela work, 1985).

⁵⁷ 'Ley de Banco Obrero', *Gaceta Oficial* (30 Jun. 1928).

⁵⁸ N. García, 'Vivienda Obrera y Gestión Estatal en Caracas. El Banco Obrero en Caracas, 1928–1945' (unpublished Universidad Central de Venezuela work, 1985), 20–4.

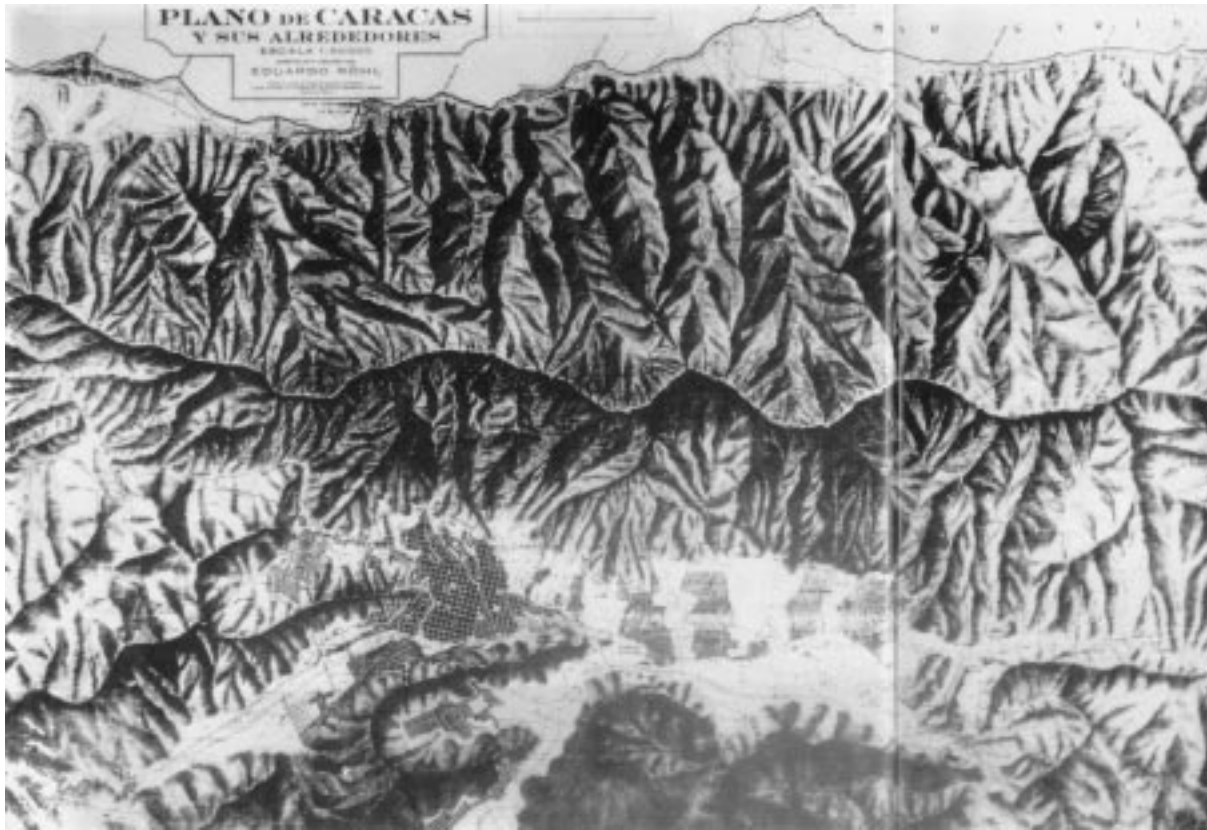


Figure 4: E. Rohl's plan of 1934 Caracas, with new suburbs eastwards of the historic centre.
From I. De-Sola Ricardo, *Contribución al Estudio de los Planos de Caracas* (Caracas, 1967)

regime into a welfare state.⁵⁹ While motorcycles and automobiles were stuck in the jammed centre of the city, public housing was given an institutional platform and the urban sprawl of Caracas was released on parole. But demographic and urban recovery were not enough to wipe out a cultural backwardness which was subtly hinted at or openly denounced in the literary works of young intellectuals.

In the capital of disappointment: the critique of literary protagonists

The rebuff of their capital was especially suffered by those with aspirations beyond the narrow horizons of the dictatorship, and the conflict was displayed in the literary realism of the Gómez era – that was also used as propaganda by the young political class searching for democratic renewal. Written from the dungeons of La Rotunda, the main prison of Gómez's Caracas, and published in Bogotá while the author was exiled in North America, J.R. Pocaterra's 1927 memoirs constitute a vivid manifesto against the dictatorial repression. There the author dated the authoritarian conservatism back to 1909, when the novelist Rufino Blanco Fombona had been gaoled for his early criticisms of the status quo. According to Pocaterra's vitriolic denouncement of the pseudo-progressive regime, Gómez's bureaucrats thought that civilization only consisted in boasting of having a telephone or 'a car bigger than the house where they dwell'; for that reason, the Caracas of these 'philistines' could not help but be an obscure and spurious city, far away from true modernization.⁶⁰ The cosmopolitan pretensions of the petty Paris of the tropics were also denied by María Eugenia Alonso, the protagonist of Teresa de la Parra's *Ifigenia* – originally published in Spanish in Paris in 1924 – when she returned to the obscure capital after many years of European education. María Eugenia was to incarnate the sacrifice of the young cosmopolitan woman in Gómez's parochial Caracas. When revisiting for the first time the centre of the capital, María Eugenia could not perceive any lively trace in the alleged Paris of South America; instead, the Caracas of her memories was only this 'flat and melancholic city' belonging to a sleepy Andalusia, 'which had fallen asleep under the sultry weather of the tropics'.⁶¹

From diverse perspectives, the same overall flatness of Gómez's Caracas was confirmed by the young political generation who opposed the dictatorial regime, whose public manifestation would come about in the 1928 revolts. Having started as a Carnival masquerade organized by students of the UCV who aimed at denouncing the regime's lack of

⁵⁹ J.J. Martín, 'Los orígenes del interés social en las políticas públicas de vivienda en Venezuela, 1911–1941', *Urbana*, 16–17 (1995), 84–7.

⁶⁰ Pocaterra, *Memorias de un venezolano de la decadencia*, vol. 2, 42.

⁶¹ T. de la Parra, *Ifigenia* (Caracas, 1986), vol. 1, 76.

freedom, the movement came to be known as the 'generation of 1928'. From the political perspective, it gathered diverse trends that were to constitute parties after Gómez's death, including Rómulo Betancourt's social democracy, Jóvito Villalba's centralism and Pío Tamayo's communism. Although he was exiled in North America in 1928, Pocaterra boosted the movement's demands with his participation in the 1929 attempt to topple the dictator, often seen as an aftermath of the students' revolts. By describing the horrors of La Rotunda, where Pocaterra claimed that Gómez's executioners had tortured to death about 160 political prisoners between 1913 and 1919,⁶² the continental success of Pocaterra's memoirs also contributed to the mythification of the generation of 1928, most of whose members were sent to gaol or labour camps.

The dark legend of Gómez's dictatorship was to be continued in literary works of the democratic era by other members of the generation of 1928, who denied any progress under the regime because of its past totalitarianism. This can partly explain why the prisoners' groans haunted the nights of that grim Caracas in novels such as Antonio Arráiz's *Puros hombres* (1938), where some inmates still invoked Spencer in order to recognize Gómez's economic achievements, whereas others lambasted Venezuela's 'collective degeneration' under his dictatorship.⁶³ Confirming how long it took the social wounds of this degeneration to heal, other works appeared as delayed, yet vivid portrayals of the regime's atrocities. That is the case of Alejandro García Maldonado's *El rastro de los dioses* (1960), where Gómez's Maracay is referred to as a 'city damned', and brutal tortures at La Rotunda are depicted as the inexorable fate of any citizen, no matter how far from the political arena he or she might be.⁶⁴ Torture is also in the family history of some characters of *Los tratos de la noche* (1955), a novel by Mariano Picón-Salas, another intellectual who labelled Gómez's Caracas as 'the capital of disappointment' when he arrived from the Andes in the 1920s.⁶⁵

Some of Europe's philosophical and literary novelties had been welcomed in local magazines of the early Gómez era, led by *El Cojo Ilustrado*, a cultural gazette that nurtured and rallied the intelligentsia of Caracas and the Spanish-speaking world for more than two decades. Every fortnight, from 1892 until 1915, the 4,000 copies of *El Cojo Ilustrado* illustrated the cosmopolitan avidity of the Venezuelan elite following the trends established in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Having closed Venezuela's main magazine by 1915, the cultural mediocrity imposed by the dictatorship was the origin of the anguish which annihilated Rómulo Gallegos's *Reinaldo Solar* (1921), an intellectual who died soon after his futile experience as an urban guerrilla. Gallegos's

⁶² Pocaterra, *Memorias de un venezolano de la decadencia*, vol. 3, 104.

⁶³ A. Arráiz, *Puros hombres* (Caracas, 1990), 184–5.

⁶⁴ A. García Maldonado, *El rastro de los dioses* (Caracas, 1960), 116–17, 340–50.

⁶⁵ M. Picón-Salas, *Biblioteca Mariano Picón-Salas* (Caracas, 1987), vol. 1, 177–83.

literary career had started in *La Alborada*, a magazine which was marked by the 'positivist beliefs' and 'patriotic grief' of Enrique Soublette, Julio Planchart and Gallegos himself.⁶⁶ As he also did in *El Cojo Ilustrado*, Gallegos expressed in *La Alborada* his interest in the relationship between environment, race, immigration, progress and civilization,⁶⁷ a positivist agenda which was also present in Gallegos's *Doña Bárbara* (1929). Originally published in Barcelona, where Gallegos lived for some years due to his wife's medical treatments, the novel rapidly became a best-seller, with editions in Buenos Aires and Caracas in 1930, in Santiago in 1933, and an English version in New York in 1931, just to mention the editions published during the Gómez era.⁶⁸ Although the ruggedness of the novel's protagonist was seen as a critical portrayal of Gómez's barbarianism, the dictator liked the rural aspects of the story which helped Gallegos to enjoy relative stability during the rest of the regime, until he began a political career which led him to Venezuela's presidency in 1948.

Some concessions were certainly obtained after the students' rebellion in 1928 – the same year when theatres of Caracas featured Shaw's *Pygmalion* and Pirandello's *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*.⁶⁹ But dissident students and trade unionists kept on conspiring clandestinely, until they were finally captured and sent to labour camps, as happened to the characters of Miguel Otero Silva's *Fiebre* (1939). Even in captivity, they continued exchanging communist manifestos and other books which inflamed their belief in the socialist utopia, such as Upton Sinclair's novels, which were banned from bookshops in Caracas.⁷⁰ That was why Alberto Rengifo – a young dissident poet who was gaoled by the dictator in Vallenilla Lanz's *Allá en Caracas* (1948) – yearned to take his beloved muse to Venice or Florence, far away from the 'flat and mediocre environment' of Gómez's Caracas.⁷¹

This escapism was even shared by some comfortable members of the Gómez bourgeoisie, who did not miss any chance to embark for the Old Continent in one of the chic liners available. Not only the newly-weds contemplating their honeymoons, but all the members of Pocaterra's *La casa de los Abila* (1921–22) offered splendid balls when they departed for their season in Europe; a time when the upper class of Caracas celebrated and coveted the troupe's tour.⁷² As soon as they were introduced to one another, the well-travelled children of Vallenilla Lanz's novel made

⁶⁶ R. Gallegos, 'Mensaje a otro superviviente de una contemplaciones ya lejanas' (1949), in P.D. Seijas (ed.), *Antología de Rómulo Gallegos* (Mexico City, 1966), 202–5.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 106–9.

⁶⁸ O. Larrazábal and G.L. Carrera, *Bibliografía integral de la novela venezolana (1842–1994)* (Caracas, 1998), 46.

⁶⁹ C. Salas, *Historia del Teatro en Caracas* (Caracas, 1974), 170.

⁷⁰ M. Otero Silva, *Fiebre* (Caracas, 1994), 117–18.

⁷¹ L. Vallenilla Lanz, jr, *Allá en Caracas* (Caracas, 1954), 70.

⁷² J.R. Pocaterra, *La casa de los Abila* (Caracas, 1991), 160–6.

speaking English and French, or knowing London and Paris, an indicator of social status. This is why the protagonist would end up being educated in the French capital until the end of the Gómez era.⁷³

In the midst of the tedium and obscurity of the dictatorial capital, María Eugenia's friends encouraged the protagonist of *Ifigenia* to go back to Europe, as most of them would actually do. The Andalusian air of Gómez's Caracas was not European enough for some of the cosmopolitan characters of these novels, who suffered not only the dictator's rebuff of the capital, but also their own sacrifice in its provinciality. Nevertheless, some other characters stayed and took on this reality as their own – which established a difference between the conflicts of this literary realism and the evasive modernism of the past.⁷⁴ In this respect, the true hero of Pocaterra's novel turned out to be Juan Abila, who faced, alone, the final bankruptcy of his snobbish family; the young man had long since cursed the spurious effects of European civilization on his native city, which he never abandoned for frivolous tours.⁷⁵ For similar reasons, María Eugenia's uncle had long since repudiated the transatlantic ships which linked Caracas with Paris.⁷⁶ Surprisingly, the creole Iphigenia herself would sacrifice her Parisian dreams to the chimera of Gómez's Caracas: María Eugenia's scruples prevented her from escaping to Europe with her lover, as her friends encouraged her to do.

Unlike María Eugenia, when Victoria Guanipa – the heroine of Gallegos's *La Trepadora* (1925) – arrived for the first time in Caracas, she was excited with the lively capital of the oil-exporting country. Having been brought up on a farm in rural Venezuela, Victoria obviously lacked María Eugenia's urban breeding, so the former could not pretend to be disappointed with Gómez's capital. But the most significant difference between the two young señoritas – who arrived in the same city at the same time – was the fact that María Eugenia's Caracas was still ruled by Paris, while Victoria already bore in mind New York as the ultimate metropolitan model for Caracas.⁷⁷ A season of exile in New York and other American cities also proved to be a good experience for the opponents of the Gómez regime. To cool off their juvenile rebelliousness, some deserters of *Fiebre* were sent to study in New York or Boston; they returned to Venezuela as down-to-earth professionals, dressed 'in the Oxford style' and humming American jingles.⁷⁸

As Picón-Salas pointed out, the sacrifices of both Gallegos' *Reinaldo Solar* and de la Parra's *Ifigenia* epitomize the backwardness of a

⁷³ Vallenilla Lanz, jr, *Allá en Caracas*, 52–3, 137–8.

⁷⁴ M. Picón-Salas, *Formación y Proceso de la Literatura Venezolana* (Caracas, 1984; 1st edn 1940), 149, 166.

⁷⁵ Pocaterra, *La casa de los Abila*, 206.

⁷⁶ de la Parra, *Ifigenia*, vol. 1, 68.

⁷⁷ R. Gallegos, *La Trepadora* (Madrid, 1982), 150–2, 173–4, 178–9, 191; see also C.E. Misle, *La Caracas de Rómulo Gallegos* (Caracas, 1986), 52–66.

⁷⁸ Otero Silva, *Fiebre*, 223–4.

Venezuela that could be considered the South American 'Shangri-La', a 'still province' which would not join the twentieth-century modernity until the dictator's death in 1935.⁷⁹ María Eugenia's disappointment with Gómez's Caracas also dramatizes the stigma of the last generation of Latin American cosmopolitans tormenting themselves with having been born in a remote suburb of European culture – a feeling inherited from the turn-of-the-century modernism and the Frenchified *belle époque*.⁸⁰ However, as would become more evident in later novels such as *Fiebre*, *Allá en Caracas*, Briceño Iragorry's *Los Riberas* (1952) or Picón-Salas's *Los tratos de la noche*, the literary characters of the late Gómez era seemed to be more at their ease with the progressive myth of northern metropolises.

Conclusion

The Gómez era remains as one of the most polemic periods of Venezuela's modern history. For decades, its victims' historical revenge prevented the later analysis from recognizing any of its achievements, but recent approaches have tended to adopt a more balanced assessment. Although Gómez's intellectuals certainly fabricated a 'golden legend' of his deeds, the 'dark legend' woven by his opponents has ignored a social and cultural transformation which did occur during the era of the 'liberal tyrant'.⁸¹ On the national level, the urban achievements of the Gómez administration in terms of economic development and amelioration of infrastructure paved the way for Venezuela's transformation into a prosperous and structured state, according to the Order-and-Progress formula envisaged by Venezuelan positivists from the late nineteenth century. This is why – in spite of their alleged flatteries of a regime which rewarded them with political posts and foreign embassies, or their supposed alteration of the sociological and political categories of European positivism – the Gómez ideologists were probably honest and accurate when recognizing the fundamental role of the Good Tyrant in structuring Venezuela's modernity as an organic society.

Such a vision *has* to be different from the view of the urban modernity of Caracas and other Venezuelan cities, whose cultural life was somewhat darkened by a dictatorship which rebuffed the capital up to the end of the 'punishment'. Their rebuff brought special suffering to the young political generation, whose most perdurable critique was developed in literary works written and published from the 1920s onwards, where the parochialism of the Venezuelan capital served as an excuse to attack the political abuses and cultural obscurity of the repressive

⁷⁹ Picón-Salas, *Biblioteca Mariano Picón-Salas*, vol. 2, 13, 239–41.

⁸⁰ A. Uslar Pietri, *Letras y hombres de Venezuela* (Caracas, 1958), 276–7.

⁸¹ Caballero, *Gómez, el tirano liberal*; Y. Segnini, *Las luces del gomecismo* (Caracas, 1987), 13–23, 255–60.

regime. The longings and imageries of those novels also served as a stage for a cultural transition from the European-oriented Caracas of the 'Bella Epoca', into the American-oriented society of the 'Años Locos' (Crazy Years), which started to show some vitality as the capital of an oil-exporting country. In opposition to the positivists' progressive report, there lies another vision of urban modernity by the literary characters, whose discrepancy with the former was due to the latter's critique of the dictatorial status quo, as well as the domain of urban culture portrayed in contemporary and later novels.