**Book review: ‘Venezuela: What everyone needs to know’ – by Miguel Tinker Salas**

I have been searching around for a book about Venezuela, the home country of my partner. My knowledge of Venezuela before I met her was as follows:

1. They have oil.
2. The women are beautiful.\*
3. The Disney film “Up!” was set there.
4. The country was run until recently by a chap called Chávez: a socialist, a populist and a loud-mouth. He died several years ago.
5. It’s too dangerous to go backpacking there; the one guy I met in South America who had tempted it had been robbed…at gunpoint…in the airport…by the security staff…that’s a spectacular level of fucked-up.

My partner has, of course, filled me in on a lot more since then. Still, I thought I should sit down and swot up on the country’s past, hoping maybe it would explain how it ended up where it is today. Aware of my yearning for a-learning, my partner bought me for my birthday ‘*Venezuela: What everyone needs to know* ‘ by Miguel Tinker Salas. A little tipsy home from dinner, I sat down with this short (218 pages) book, the cover all socialist red and fluttering flags.

[Image of the book]

The book is divided into three parts: one covering the history of Venezuela from the colonial to the modern era, a second covering the oil boom and 20th century Venezuela up to the rise of Chávez, and a third covering the period under Chávez and his buffoonish successor Nicolas Maduro. I found part one (Venezuela before oil) to be an interesting and informative meander through the stories and legends surrounding the nation’s founding fathers (and mothers), with much focus on the structure of the colonial economy (as we’ll see below, such economic analysis of the Chávez era is notable by its absence).

Part two begins with the discovery of that lubricator of economies, that liquid gold…that black curse. Oil. Throughout Venezuela’s turbulent 20th century history, oil runs thickly and deeply. Tinker notes that oil brought the wealth that allowed the country early access to the fruits of American modernity: electricity, refrigeration, Hollywood, cadillacs, baseball. For much of the 20th century, Venezuela was led by military strongmen and presidents selected by a self-serving senate, all of whom struggled to get their cut of the oil boom’s riches. Western-style democracy arrived in the second half of the century. Tinker goes on to argue that although oil enriched a lucky class of white, upper and middle class Venezuelans, this never seeped down to improve the lot of the lower classes, much of whom are of mixed European-indigenous-African descent. Tinker claims that inequality brought principally by the exploitative practices of foreign oil companies and a nationalised but arms-length oil enterprise called PdVSA created fertile ground for the rise of a socialist movement in Venezuela.

From the beginning of the book, I think it is fair to say that the author's left-wing views are apparent, although I don't think his treatment of the history up to the era of Chávez was partisan to the point of obscuring the truth. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the part three of the book.

Part three………..

I recognise this book was written around 2014, when it was just about possible for the most idealogical of Western "progressive" thinkers to still see the positive side of the Bolivarian revolution. However, as someone whose family has been directly affected, I found it incredible that the book makes no mention of the damage caused by the Chavistas' attempt at a planned economy. The author does not claim to be an economist, but I would have thought it obvious that a government bent on appropriating private business and property is disastrous for the economy. Who would invest in a business that could be snatched away at any moment? There is discussion of the currency controls of the pre-Chávez era, but little mention of it under Chávez and Maduro, nor the hyperinflation (although the worst of that has happened *since* 2014). The author is either avoiding the facts or else hasn't understood that a dysfunctional home economy coupled with an inability to import goods due to currency controls is by far the most important cause of the shortages of staple goods that Tinker does mention. Communism has been shown not to work, time and time again. Miguel Tinker Salas does not seem to have got the memo.

The suggestion of "international political pressures" being in part responsible for shortages feels disingenuous, as to my knowledge the only sanctions in place at the time Tinker wrote the book were on the sale of arms (due to Venezuela’s failure to prevent drugs trafficking) and against individual government officials involved in the violent suppression of opposition protests in 2014. However, Tinker’s point-of-view fits with Chávista rhetoric of an economic war being waged against Venezuela by the capitalist American pigs.

What is most infuriating is that the author is a Venezuelan living in the US; one of the lucky ones who got out. He derides a middle class who he alleges oppose the government only for fear of losing their positions of status in society. My partner’s middle-class family spend up to eight hours in a line to buy flour and oil. Often there is none left once they make it to the front. When on holiday in Spain or Portugal, we do tours of pharmacies to buy the medicine that keeps my partner’s father alive. Medicine is now almost impossible to come by in Venezuela. And I’m not talking some weird, specialist drug; unbelievably, we even have to send boxes of aspirin. When I say send, I mean find a friend who is travelling back to Venezuela, because there is no functioning postal service (the customs officials take all parcels to sell on the black market anyway), and no international courier will deliver to Venezuela. I say to you, Miguel, have you tried living in Venezuela recently? What planet are you living on when you suggest that life in Venezuela has improved under Chávismo? Yes, the social programs undoubtedly raised, temporarily, the standard of living of the country’s poorest. But the approach was *unsustainable*. Thanks to Chávez and his successors, I had to watch my partner cry at the sight of brother-in-law as he arrived in Spain escaping from Venezuela: he was emaciated, having eaten once-a-day for the last two years, mostly just pasta and margarine, occasionally an egg. And he is one of the lucky ones. Many now find their food in the refuse sacks outside restaurants (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-39140060>).As recently as July 2016, Tinker claimed that there is no crisis in Venezuela, that no one is starving (<https://www.pomona.edu/news/2016/06/27-venezuela-expert-miguel-tinker-salas-breaks-down-nation%E2%80%99s-crisis>).

\*I obviously found this to be true.