

## INTRODUCTION

# APPROACHING CORRUPTION AND ANTICORRUPTION IN VENEZUELA, 1908–48

As he wrote his memoirs recounting his years of service in the regime of Juan Vicente Gómez (1908–35), Gumersindo Torres found himself returning again and again to the issue of corruption. Trained as a medical doctor, Torres was pulled into politics as a young man, and Gómez eventually appointed him to a series of official positions, including two stints as minister of development (1917–22, 1929–31). Torres took pride in his public service and believed that Gómez's long rule, despite its manifest faults, had benefited Venezuela. The dictator could be credited with ending a century of civil wars, establishing the authority of the central government, constructing a national system of highways, and creating Venezuela's first professional treasury bureaucracy and military. Working on his memoirs periodically during the dictatorship and after Gómez's death in 1935, Torres continued to defend the ruler who, in the eyes of his supporters, had done more than any other to make Venezuela a modern nation-state.

Nevertheless, as a rigorous administrator imbued with the ideals of public service, Torres could not avoid deploring the abuses of power that he witnessed regularly for more than a quarter century. We can imagine his narrow face set firmly and his piercing eyes filled with frustration as he wrote pages denouncing cabinet ministers who enriched themselves from the public treasury, state governors (then referred to as state presidents) who ran illegal monopolies, and public officials who reaped personal fortunes from the early development of the nation's petroleum industry.<sup>1</sup> Torres felt compelled to assert his own financial probity, a claim supported by others, and to recount the occasions when he thwarted officials' attempts to misuse public power for personal profit. The dilemma of how to reconcile these rampant abuses of government office with his belief in the positive impact of the Gómez regime hangs over much of Torres's memoir, unresolved until he could avoid it no longer.

Torres's most direct engagement with the issue of systemic corruption came during his discussion of the two years he served as chief administrator of the Venezuelan Industrial Cattle Company, a business partnership that joined Gómez with many of his state presidents and other collaborators in what the regime publicized as an effort to modernize the cattle industry. Once installed as manager, however, Torres was distressed to learn that the partners in the company, which received large subsidies of public money, treated the enterprise primarily as a source of easy cash. Popular riots against the company following Gómez's death left Torres concerned that his involvement in the enterprise might be perceived as a stain on his otherwise clean reputation.<sup>2</sup> And so he returned to work on his manuscript, reflecting on corruption not as the individual failings of unscrupulous officials but rather as a central problem in explaining the nature of Gómez's power—a topic Torres felt freer to explore, no doubt, now that Gómez had died. "In Venezuela," he wrote,

public functionaries, from the President of the Republic to the office doorman or simple police agent, are accustomed to using their political position to make money with business dealings of every kind. Naturally there are honorable exceptions, and many are the public employees who have not played that game [*que no han comulgado con esa hostia*] and have left their offices as poor as when they entered. General Gómez was not an exception, but rather followed the general

rule, as did the absolute majority of men who served him; he left their hands free so that they might enrich themselves. Perhaps this was one of the most effective methods by which he imposed himself on them with all that force of authority which he maintained in Venezuela until his death. General Gómez, a man of business, used his power and great authority to do business and thus died a millionaire, and such abuses were in accordance with his exercise of power.<sup>3</sup>

Torres's comments convey an insight that serves as a point of departure for this study of the relationship between corruption and state formation: the use of public office for private profit was intimately intertwined with the style of rule developed by Gómez and his allies, and it advanced their efforts to create the most powerful national state Venezuela had ever known. At the same time, Torres's memoir reminds readers of Venezuelans' efforts to curb corruption (or "abuses," as Torres wrote in the quotation above). These anticorruption efforts also shaped the new state in decisive ways. Some officials within the regime sought to limit the malfeasance committed by other officials, and more numerous Venezuelans outside the regime protested its corruption with much greater vigor. Following Gómez's death, for example, the citizenry attacked the properties owned by the dictator and his allies in an outpouring of pent-up popular rage. These protests forced Gómez's successor, president and general Eleazar López Contreras (1935–41), to curtail the most hated forms of corruption, even though more discreet methods of malfeasance continued in the years that followed.

The most dramatic anticorruption drive began in 1945, when a coalition of young military officers and civilian reformers overthrew president and general Isaías Medina Angarita (1941–45), López Contreras's hand-picked successor. The reformers put López Contreras, Medina Angarita, and 165 former officials from their administrations and from the Gómez era on trial for corruption as part of their larger project to create a modern democratic state. These anticorruption trials, which received widespread support at first, soon became so controversial that they contributed to the downfall of the reformist government in 1948.<sup>4</sup> In sum, corruption and anticorruption—the themes that Torres grappled with in his writing and his life—were both central to Venezuelan politics throughout the period from 1908 to 1948, the years when the national state was consol-

idated. This book's overarching thesis is that these two competing tendencies shaped the process of state formation.

### **The History of Corruption and Anticorruption: Problems and Concepts**

Latin American protests against corruption have become so commonplace in recent decades that it is surprising historians have not devoted more attention to the topic.<sup>5</sup> From the 1990s onward, allegations of corruption have forced presidents out of office in several Latin American nations. The bribery scandal involving the transnational Brazilian firm Odebrecht rocked the entire region in the 2010s, and public opinion surveys often rank corruption as a top concern among Latin American citizens. Transparency International, the nongovernmental organization that publishes a widely read annual index of perceptions of corruption, currently gives Venezuela the most unfavorable ranking of any nation in the Americas, and Venezuelans have protested against corruption for years.<sup>6</sup> If one purpose of history is to expand our understanding of present-day problems—problems as diverse as environmental degradation, racism, and economic inequality—then why have Latin Americanists paid relatively little attention to the history of corruption?

Some historians are deterred by a perceived lack of sources, especially for studies of the period after most Latin American nations won independence in the early nineteenth century. Although the crowns of Spain and Portugal investigated the malfeasance of colonial officials, thus providing a substantial documentary base for studies of corruption during the three centuries of European rule, post-colonial governments proved less likely to investigate and document corruption by their officials.<sup>7</sup> One goal of this book is to demonstrate that research into the history of post-independence corruption and anticorruption may be more feasible than historians have generally believed. In researching this project, I have found ample materials related to corruption and anticorruption in government officials' correspondence, reports from the Treasury Ministry, dispatches from diplomats in Venezuela representing the United States, Britain, Spain and the Vatican, political pamphlets and broadsheets, congressional debates, newspapers, the records of the anticorruption trials of the mid-1940s, and memoirs and private correspondence written by Gómez's allies and enemies.

Another methodological issue hindering historians' investigation of this topic is the thorny question of how to define *corruption*. Scholars who study the phenomenon from a diversity of disciplinary perspectives—including anthropology, political science, and economics, as well as history—are far from a consensus.<sup>8</sup> Some insist that public officials' use of their power for private enrichment is corrupt only if it violates a law, but this approach is clearly unsatisfactory for cases in which unscrupulous cliques created laws with self-serving loopholes.<sup>9</sup> Other scholars debate whether the concept of corruption should focus exclusively on the actions of government officials or be defined to include others, such as business leaders, whose actions may also violate public trust and undermine public well-being.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, just as social scientists often search for a culturally neutral definition to apply across diverse societies, historians face the challenge of formulating a definition that avoids the projection of current ideas or attitudes regarding corruption onto the past.<sup>11</sup> In particular, a historical study that examines *anticorruption* as well as corruption needs to employ a definition that incorporates the attitudes of historical actors themselves so as to illuminate a past society's discourses and actions against "corruption."<sup>12</sup>

In this book, I follow scholars who emphasize that the "concept of corruption is heavily contested and socially constructed"<sup>13</sup> by historical actors. This constructivist approach draws our attention to how past societies' understanding of the boundary between corruption and acceptable behavior has changed (or not) over time. By highlighting how political debates and protests have shaped a society's definition of corruption, such an approach acknowledges that consensus on the definition of *corruption* was often elusive in the past, just as it is today. Political scientist Michael Johnston, a proponent of the constructivist approach, emphasizes that "it is an irony of corruption that where it is most important it can also be most difficult to define."<sup>14</sup> This observation certainly aligns with the situation in Venezuela between 1908 and 1948, an era of rapid change when many Venezuelans saw corruption as an important issue but agreement on defining and punishing it often proved elusive. With these considerations in mind, I define corruption as *the use of public office and other public resources for private benefit in ways that were condemned by significant segments of public opinion in the society under study*. Throughout this book, I use *corruption* and its synonyms, such as *malfeasance* and *profiteering*, only

as reflections of public perception during the historical period being discussed, and never as a legal or moral judgment.

This definition, by emphasizing the “social meaning”<sup>15</sup> of corruption, recognizes that societies’ perceptions of corruption have varied across historical time and geographical space. As one research team of historians who embrace the constructivist approach has argued, “corruption actually acquires its meaning in relation to its social setting and historical context.”<sup>16</sup> It follows that the nuances of each nation’s understanding of corruption will reflect its particular experience at any given moment in time. For example, by the early twentieth century, Venezuelans had a long and bitter history of living under monopolies that, through legal or illegal means, reserved some areas of the national economy as the exclusive preserve of powerful individuals or the groups they favored, to the detriment of much of the population. During the eighteenth century, many Venezuelans condemned and resisted the monopoly over the lucrative cacao economy granted by the Spanish crown to a company of Basque merchants.<sup>17</sup> And, as I outline in the next chapter, the final three decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a steady stream of monopoly concessions granted by national officials who were widely perceived to profit personally from the cartels they created. The hardship imposed on the consumers, workers, and entrepreneurs whose livelihoods were ruined or undermined by monopolies reached its peak during the Gómez dictatorship. Thus, throughout the four decades examined in this book, as Venezuelans considered whether certain activities constituted corruption, they were most unified when denouncing monopolies established by their rulers.

This book’s constructivist approach is in keeping with historians’ tendency to study corruption (and other phenomena) from an emic perspective, that is, from the viewpoint of historical actors.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, emic approaches to corruption, like all analytical tools, have their limitations and potential problems. Like other scholars, I recognize that historical actors’ notion of crucial elements of corruption, such as the boundary between “public” and “private,” was often blurry and flexible, and that written sources for deciphering “public opinion” are usually weighted (certainly in early twentieth-century Venezuela) toward the minority of the population in the middle and upper classes.<sup>19</sup> But the advantages of this emic perspective outweigh the disadvantages, especially when compared to alternative approaches.

Adopting a supposedly “universal” concept of corruption to understand Venezuelans who fought against it a century ago would ignore political and cultural context. As historian Jens Ivo Engels has argued, it is precisely by exploring such context and nuance that historical studies can contribute to interdisciplinary understanding of struggles over corruption, in both the past and the present.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, a close examination of Venezuelans’ debates over corruption during the first half of the twentieth century allows us to make useful distinctions between two types of profiteering that elicited different responses. I use the term *predatory corruption* to refer to public officials’ use of their positions to extract resources *directly* from the population for their private benefit. As recounted in subsequent chapters, Gómez and his subordinates used their power to create monopolies over cattle, beef, liquor, and other commodities, as well as to seize properties and extract coerced payments from those they ruled. Criticisms of Gómez’s monopolies echoed long-standing Venezuelan complaints that their rulers created such cartels as a method of solidifying their political networks and enriching themselves at the expense of consumers (who had to pay monopoly prices) and entrepreneurs (who were often obliged to sell their operations cheaply to predatory officials). Venezuelans roundly condemned Gómez and his officials for enriching themselves by extracting wealth directly from those they ruled. These predatory abuses therefore may also be referred to as *generally condemned corruption*—that is, practices reviled throughout society and widely deemed to be worthy of punishment.<sup>21</sup>

By contrast, what I refer to as *ambiguous corruption* or *financial corruption* occurred when officials manipulated public assets such as treasury funds or petroleum contracts for their private benefit, a practice that evoked more mixed or ambivalent responses from Venezuelans during the first half of the twentieth century. This mode of profiteering was more likely to provoke disagreements over the precise boundaries between the public and private spheres, making attempts at punishment controversial. The financial malfeasance denounced by anti-Gomecistas (opponents of Gómez) often constituted ambiguous corruption, because during the period under study Venezuelans vehemently disagreed over whether it deserved condemnation and punishment.<sup>22</sup> This distinction between generally condemned predatory corruption and ambiguous financial corruption becomes especially illuminating when analyzing the post-Gómez transition and the con-

troversty surrounding the anticorruption trials of the 1940s. The rulers who succeeded Gómez in 1935–45 defended cash payments to their allies and to a wide array of citizens who requested aid—payments made at the president’s discretion—as necessary to maintain political stability, a public good. Prosecutors, in contrast, argued that the officials had used public funds improperly to build networks of personal political support, or to enrich themselves. While debates raged over the probity of these financial transactions, prosecutions for predatory forms of corruption provoked no real controversy. This distinction between widely condemned predatory corruption and ambiguous financial corruption, then, proves useful for exploring Venezuelans’ perceptions of malfeasance and may provide insights for historical studies beyond Venezuela.

### **Corruption, Anticorruption, and Neopatrimonial State Formation**

The contradictory tendencies in Gómez’s regime that nagged at Gumersindo Torres—the harmful abuses of power versus the welcome creation of political stability and economic growth—are reflected in historians’ contrasting assessments of the dictator. Gómez’s defenders have usually acknowledged his abuses, such as his profiteering and his cruel treatment of political opponents, but have emphasized his success in pacifying the country, building infrastructure, overseeing the early development of the oil economy, and laying the foundation of a modern state.<sup>23</sup> In the opposing camp, critical scholars argue that his twenty-seven-year rule represented the opposite of national ideals: Gómez’s repression delayed the development of democratic institutions; his generally cozy relationship with foreign oil companies and their governments locked the nation into neocolonial dependency; his imprisonment, torture, and murder of political foes belied claims that he brought “peace” to the nation; and his blatant corruption set a low bar for standards of public probity.<sup>24</sup> Each side in the debate has ample evidence to support its point of view, but neither perspective offers a wholistic synthesis of state formation under Gómez or an altogether satisfying way of explaining the place of the Gómez era in the nation’s history.

This book argues that in Venezuela between 1908 and 1948 corruption and anticorruption contributed to a neopatrimonial process of state formation, one that included both patrimonial practices and



attempts to implement modern bureaucratic forms of rule.<sup>25</sup> Neither of these two modes of governance was new to Venezuela in the early twentieth century, but tensions between them became more pronounced than at any previous time in the nation's history, and they require discussion here. Patrimonialism—the continual intermixing of public and private interests—provides context for understanding corruption and anticorruption during the first half of the twentieth century in Venezuela. In a patrimonial regime, the ruler generally fills important political and administrative positions with his kin and business associates, who accept subordination to the ruler in exchange for the economic and political benefits he allows them as his clients. In their administration of the state, the ruler and these clients pursue their joint interests, which override any institutional or legal considerations. Goods formally identified as public, such as government funds and the powers attached to public office, are in practice used to advance the personal interests of the ruler and his clique, including their private accumulation of wealth and their continuation in power. These private interests provide the central logic of a patrimonial regime, maintaining cohesive bonds of loyalty within the regime and leading to coercive, often predatory relations between rulers and citizens. Thus, corruption (the use of public power for private benefit in ways that are condemned by significant segments of society) is an inherent aspect of patrimonialism.<sup>26</sup> When Venezuelans opposed to the Gómez regime denounced its “personalism” (*personalismo*), they had in mind the same characteristics that scholars associate with patrimonialism.

Under Gómez, profiteering became more pervasive and systematic than under past regimes, so people resented it as never before.<sup>27</sup> Gómez's opponents denounced his economically motivated “abuses,” “robbery,” “monopolies,” and “embezzlement” (*peculado*)<sup>28</sup>—all of which they only occasionally labeled as “corruption”—as much as they denounced any other aspect of his regime. Indeed, even some of Gómez's closest collaborators conceded that the dictator and many of his allies used their power improperly to enrich themselves; Torres was hardly alone among Gomecistas (allies and supporters of Gómez) in his criticism of patrimonial excesses. Román Cárdenas, who served as treasury minister from 1913 to 1922, denounced the practice of tax farming, which continued intermittently into the early 1930s, as inherently corrupt because it allowed favored individuals to profit from

the collection of state revenues.<sup>29</sup> Carlos Siso, another civilian functionary of the regime, deplored the “monopoly” over cattle markets exercised by Gómez and his allies.<sup>30</sup> López Contreras, one of Gómez’s leading generals and his successor as president, lamented the use of Venezuelan army units as agricultural laborers on Gomecistas’ estates and denounced officials who used their positions to embezzle public funds and secure lucrative petroleum concessions.<sup>31</sup> Still, these critics understood that such patrimonial abuses created much of the regime’s internal cohesion, as Gómez and his allies cooperated to use their political clout to accumulate private wealth. Without the bonds of loyalty created by personalistic exchanges, they realized, the regime’s accomplishments of political centralization and economic stabilization would have been impossible.

But just as patrimonialism provided one source of the regime’s strength, the selective development of bureaucratic expertise and efficiency in strategic areas of the state apparatus provided another, distinct form of power in the neopatrimonial regime. The treasury bureaucracy and the military—two pillars of any modern state—were professionalized to a greater extent under Gómez than previously. The military reform of 1910–13 created the nation’s first professional army with standardized training and equipment; it was implemented, in part, by graduates of the newly created military academy, though Gómez reserved the highest ranks for men personally loyal to him.<sup>32</sup> Significantly, the military’s quasi-professionalization became intertwined with an initiative to create a modern treasury bureaucracy to provide the necessary revenues—an innovation proposed by Treasury Minister Cárdenas as necessary to curtail corruption, boost the economy, and fund the government’s state-building projects.<sup>33</sup> Cárdenas’s drive to root out corruption in tax collection by adhering to what he called “the modern science of finances”<sup>34</sup> led to the creation of a professional fiscal bureaucracy and dramatically improved government finances before the oil economy took off in the mid-1920s. Thus, anticorruption sentiment within the regime animated the increasing bureaucratic power of the state at the same time that intensified patrimonial abuses by other officials—viewed as corrupt by many Venezuelans—cemented alliances among Gómez and many of his key collaborators. Both corruption and anticorruption were fundamental to Venezuela’s neopatrimonial process of state formation.

Such dynamics did not fade away entirely during the post-Gómez

transition of 1935–45. Instead, neopatrimonialism was refined by Gómez's two successors, both military men from the Andean state of Táchira, like Gómez. Presidents López Contreras and Medina Angarita initiated a gradual transition toward limited democracy, expanded the federal bureaucracy, increased state oversight of the oil industry, and established a national comptroller's office to audit government finances, though the office was widely regarded as weak.<sup>35</sup> While López Contreras and Medina Angarita ended the systemic predatory corruption that had marked the dictatorship, their opponents criticized their continuation of payments to allies and supporters through the discretionary fund known as Chapter VII of the budget of the Ministry of Interior Relations. The ongoing process of neopatrimonial state formation, with its combination of bureaucratic and patrimonial power, was now paralleled by a public debate aimed at distinguishing corruption from acceptable government practices. A variety of opposition groups led by middle-class reformers criticized López Contreras and Medina Angarita for continuing the "personalist" practices of Gómez—especially the Chapter VII payments—and called for a "modern" state free of corruption. In response, government officials defended the expenditures from Chapter VII as a necessary mechanism of effective governance in what they viewed as a paternalistic political culture ingrained in Venezuelan society.

The failure of the anticorruption trials to resolve this dispute, following reformers' seizure of power in 1945, facilitated the continuation of a neopatrimonial state as Venezuela's economy became ever more dependent on oil. Indeed, scholars who have examined Venezuela during and after the mid-twentieth century offer interpretations of the nation's petrostate that are compatible with the concept of neopatrimonialism or embrace it explicitly. The anthropologist Fernando Coronil provides a theoretically sophisticated analysis of the peculiar interweaving of modernity and rent-seeking (the tendency to seek wealth from the state's resources rather than through productive enterprises) within Venezuelan political culture during most of the twentieth century.<sup>36</sup> More recently, historian Margarita López Maya, in her studies of the Hugo Chávez era (1999–2013), as well as the post-Chávez era, has argued that the concept of neopatrimonialism offers insight into the Venezuelan state of the early twenty-first century, a view echoed by political scientists.<sup>37</sup>

## Other Historiographical Contexts and Contributions

This study builds on insights into the history of anticorruption, a topic which has inspired recent research among historians of Europe even while it remains an undeveloped theme in the historiography of post-independence Latin America.<sup>38</sup> Scholarly work on the history of anticorruption in Europe has succeeded in making the point that the histories of corruption and anticorruption need to be studied together. Indeed, if one adopts an emic definition of corruption, it follows logically that there is no corruption without anticorruption sentiment, a perspective also emphasized by anthropologists.<sup>39</sup> But as the editors of a volume of cutting-edge essays on the history of anticorruption observe, these studies tend to treat anticorruption campaigns as political instruments utilized to damage opponents.<sup>40</sup> *Profitable Offices* departs from that anticorruption paradigm in at least two ways. First, in my examination of the campaign by Cárdenas, Gómez's treasury minister, to replace tax farming with tax collection by salaried, professionally trained bureaucrats, I emphasize Cárdenas's vision of fiscal modernity rather than any political motivation, such as rivalry between factions within the regime. Cárdenas saw tax farming as a form of corruption which deprived the treasury of revenue and constrained economic growth. Ironically, the success of Cárdenas's bureaucratic reforms led to a growth of treasury revenues which Gómez often spent in a patrimonial fashion. Thus, a reform that Cárdenas framed as "modern" ultimately served patrimonial ends, a scenario that illuminates the dynamics of neopatrimonial state formation rather than appearing as a political win or loss for Cárdenas and his fiscal bureaucracy.

This study also departs from a purely political paradigm of anticorruption in its treatment of Gómez's opponents. I take seriously the emotional tropes of humiliation and wounded honor used by men and women to describe their suffering under the predatory corruption of Gómez and his allies. While their denunciations of corruption had obvious political goals, the sentiments they expressed offer insight into the lived experiences of many Venezuelans in the face of official predation. Anticorruption struggles thus deserve a place in scholars' consideration of the affective dimension of state formation, if we take *affect* to refer to shared sentiments that lead to action.<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, as I explore the anticorruption rhetoric and actions of

Rómulo Betancourt and other young anti-Gomecista reformers from 1928 through the 1930s and '40s, I acknowledge their political motives but also take as sincere their desire to establish a modern democratic state distinct from the personalist one they associated with the corruption of Gómez, López Contreras, and Medina Angarita. Democratic reformers' condemnations of corruption as incompatible with modernity, along with Treasury Minister Cárdenas's similar justification of reforms under Gómez, open an interpretative perspective on anticorruption struggles that goes beyond narrow political interpretations. Despite their political differences, Gomecista technocrats and younger populist reformers both viewed corruption as the antithesis of modern state practices—and they did so well before the emergence of modernization theory in the United States and Europe in the 1950s.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, this study contributes to the historical literature on Latin America during the national period by offering a book-length, interdisciplinary analysis of how both corruption and anticorruption contributed to the process of state formation. In recent decades, historians of Latin America have viewed the state's internal dynamics and its relationship to society from the diverse perspectives of political economy, discourse analysis, cultural studies, and gender studies.<sup>43</sup> My analysis borrows from each of these approaches as it explores the material and symbolic forces at work in the construction of state power and resistance to it. Just as some of the best work on state formation illuminates how systems of power are negotiated from above and below, the present study seeks to demonstrate that placing corruption and anticorruption at the center of the negotiation of rule can deepen our understanding of this process.<sup>44</sup>

### The Book's Organization

The chapters that follow are organized both thematically and chronologically. Chapter 1 provides an overview of Venezuelan politics before Gómez and then examines, in broad strokes, the course of neopatrimonial state formation during his twenty-seven-year rule, providing the context for what follows. As outlined below, chapters 2 through 5 then explore specific aspects of the Gómez regime, adhering to a thematic scheme. Chapters 6 and 7 discuss the post-Gómez era, 1935–48, proceeding in a chronological fashion.

Chapter 2 analyzes the Gomecistas' cattle monopoly, the most

important economic enterprise that bound together the dictator and his collaborators from the earliest years of their regime. It argues that Gomecistas' partnerships in the cattle business served an integrative function by promoting the internal unity of the regime as its principal members cooperated to centralize political power and use it for private profit. The cattle monopoly also shaped the relationship between the state and society as non-Gomecista ranchers were forced out of business and as consumers buying beef had little choice but to submit to the cartel.

Chapter 3 examines the drive by Treasury Minister Cárdenas to replace the regime's corrupt system of tax farming, in which the treasury contracted with leading Gomecistas to collect the liquor tax, with a new bureaucracy staffed by salaried state revenue collectors. Gómez's decision to allow Cárdenas to curb tax farming, despite the harm to his collaborators, reflected the dictator's need to increase domestic revenues as World War I disrupted international trade. Although not all Cárdenas's hard-won victories against corruption survived his retirement, his pursuit of fiscal reform demonstrates that the discursive contrast between corruption and modernity shaped segments of the Gomecista state from within as well as providing an eventual rallying cry for anti-Gomecistas. Chapters 2 and 3, taken together, argue that cattle and liquor played central roles in Venezuelan state formation and that, at least during the first half of the Gómez era, their significance outweighed that of oil, the commodity scholars most often associate with political centralization in Venezuela.

In Chapter 4, I explore the experiences and discourses of middle-class anti-Gomecistas who suffered the regime's predatory corruption. These opponents framed submission to Gomecista predation as a cause of humiliation within the highly gendered norms of bourgeois honor. Studies of opposition to Gómez usually emphasize either the political opportunism of rival *caudillos* (political strongmen) or the democratic aspirations of younger urban protesters,<sup>45</sup> but this chapter's analysis highlights the resonance of an opposition discourse that framed anticorruption as a defense of male and female honor within the patriarchal assumptions of the era. The innovation of the later, younger anti-Gomecistas who burst onto the scene in 1928 was to link such anticorruption sentiment to democratic ideals as the basis for mass political mobilization. Rómulo Betancourt, the leader of the young activists, concluded that middle-class deprivation un-

der Gomecista monopolies would drive this social sector to join with peasants and workers in a new, multi-class political movement.

Chapter 5 discusses how the oil boom that began in the 1920s funded two modes of financial profiteering. First, as many scholars have discussed, Gómez used the state's control over subsoil deposits to grant concessions for oil production to his family and political allies; many concessions went to a company Gómez himself controlled. Foreign companies purchased these concessions for large sums, enriching individual Venezuelans rather than the nation.<sup>46</sup> A second, much less studied mode of profiteering occurred when rising oil revenues funded a substantial expansion of payments from Chapter VII of the budget of the Ministry of Interior Relations, the presidential slush fund. While scholars such as Coronil have pointed to the connection between Venezuela's petroleum riches and its rent-seeking political culture, none has offered a detailed examination of Chapter VII, which benefited thousands more Venezuelans—including many in the middle class—than ever received the famous petroleum concessions. Significantly, both the oil concessions and Chapter VII payments allowed Venezuelans who enjoyed the regime's favor to benefit from the state's largesse without extracting resources directly from the citizenry. As a result, Venezuelans' responses were more divided and ambivalent than their reactions to predatory corruption. Many denounced the concessions and Chapter VII payments as corrupt, but many others either defended these practices or regarded them with ambivalence, in contrast to the widespread condemnations of predatory corruption.

Chapter 6 argues that anticorruption sentiment and politics played an essential role in shaping the post-Gómez transition of 1935–45. Following the dictator's death, the protests that targeted the properties of officials perceived as corrupt led to the nationalization of Gómez's fortune, and President López Contreras's curtailment of predatory corruption was crucial to the stabilization of his administration. Nevertheless, debates in the press and the congress over López Contreras's and Medina Angarita's continuation of Chapter VII revealed deep disagreements over the probity of these discretionary payments, indicating that they exemplified ambiguous financial corruption during the post-Gómez transition. Critics of Chapter VII gained the most political traction when, late in Medina Angarita's administration, they integrated their denunciations into a larger nar-



rative of presidential personalism (which, again, I regard as synonymous with the patrimonial dimension of neopatrimonialism).

Chapter 7 examines the anticorruption trials organized by the Democratic Action Party (Acción Democrática, AD) following the 1945 coup that overthrew Medina Angarita. AD justified these ad hoc proceedings against 167 individuals associated with the governments of Gómez, López Contreras, and Medina Angarita by arguing that punishing past corruption was necessary to root out personalism and create a modern state. I argue that the trials initially enjoyed widespread support, especially among the middle classes, and that public support for the punishment of predatory corruption remained strong throughout the reformist *trienio* (three-year period of AD rule, 1945–48). Nevertheless, the trials lost much public support due to ongoing disagreements over the appropriateness of payments from Chapter VII. Enthusiasm for the trials dwindled as the tribunal created by AD punished large numbers of defendants for making or accepting payments from Chapter VII. Rather than laying a foundation for the modern state promised by AD, the anticorruption campaign of 1945–48 highlighted divisions over reformers' claim that discretionary payments from Chapter VII were often corrupt. More broadly, I suggest that disputes over the trials revealed the middle class's mounting ambivalence toward AD's professed ideal of an impersonal bureaucratic state.

Such ambivalence was hardly unique to Venezuela. Other historians have found that Latin America's middle classes often espoused the modernist ideals of a merit-based society while simultaneously employing antithetical means, such as personal relationships, to obtain favored access to public resources and to protect their status and careers.<sup>47</sup> This book supports scholars' emphasis on middle-class vacillation as its members navigated such contradictions during the mid-twentieth century.<sup>48</sup> The controversy over Venezuela's anticorruption trials indicates that while AD's notion of a modern state exerted appeal in the abstract, the prospect of severing ties to state patronage—of creating an impersonal state that allowed officials little space for the consideration of individual status or circumstances in the distribution of public resources—represented too great an innovation for many in the middle class that AD sought to represent.

Scholars who frame their discussion of corruption and anticorruption by examining historical actors' halting pursuit of modernity



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remind us that while modernist aspirations promise to dispel ambiguity and uncertainty, they rarely do.<sup>49</sup> To be sure, the Venezuelan nation-state that existed in 1948, the year that marks the close of this book's narrative, conformed more closely to the principles of modern state organization than the state Gómez seized control of in 1908. Ultimately, however, the history of corruption and anticorruption underscores the development of enduring neopatrimonial dynamics rather than a stage in the more or less linear development of modern forms of governance, as envisioned by some of the reformers who appear in this study. The continuation of neopatrimonial dynamics in the Venezuelan state of the early twenty-first century suggests that the period examined here witnessed the creation of patterns that would continue to ripple through the nation's history for decades to come.