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Review / Reseña

The Cultural Legacy of the Military Dictatorship in Chile

Margaret Power

Illinois Institute of Technology

Silvia Nagy-Zekmi and Fernando Leiva, eds. *Democracy in Chile. The Legacy of September 11, 1973*. Brighton, England and Portland, Oregon: Sussex Academic Press, 2005.

This edited volume offers a rich assessment of the impact that the September 11, 1973, military coup had on Chilean society. The book developed from the 2003 conference, “Democracy in Latin America: Thirty Years after Chile’s 9/11” held at the State University of New York at Albany. The interdisciplinary nature of the book enhances its ability to cover a range of topics and incorporate a variety of approaches, thus deepening the scope of questions asked (and answered) and subjects covered. The editors have done a very

good job of bringing together an assorted set of chapters that they successfully weave together with helpful introductions.

The book consists of sixteen chapters, a forward by Marjorie Agosín, an introduction to the book by the editors, and an epilogue by Fabiola Letelier. The different chapters variously address cultural productions, specifically films, murals, and novels; Pinochet, issues of impunity, and the recently declassified U.S. government files; connections between the Chilean September 11 and the U.S. one; and a range of specific issues such as domestic servants, the labor movement, education, and the *Mapuches* (Chile's largest indigenous group) and logging. Although each chapter stands on its own, combined they offer a powerful answer to the question: What impact has the military coup that overthrew the Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende had on Chilean society, culture, and politics?

The answer, not surprisingly, is neither a simple one nor a particularly positive one. The main issue the authors grapple with is the ongoing legacy of seventeen years of military repression and (in 2003) the close to thirteen years of democracy. One of the recurring themes is the reality of impunity and, at that time, the Concertación's inability or unwillingness to prosecute those members of the Chilean military, including General Pinochet, who stand accused of committing horrendous abuses of human rights.

In the first chapter, "Finding the Pinochet File: Pursuing Truth, Justice, and Historical Memory through Declassified US Documents", Peter Kornbluh discusses some of the amazing information that his examination of the U.S. government documents declassified in the late 1990s by President Clinton has revealed. The release of some 24,000 documents has provided evidence of what U.S. government officials knew about the atrocities committed in Chile by the military and when they knew it; they also show what different U.S. government officials thought about these criminal acts. These documents did more than shed light on the past; they also

aided legal attempts to bring those who committed these crimes to justice. For example, Chilean Judge Guzmán used the information from the declassified documents to indict General Pinochet on charges related to his role in the death and disappearances of people who were killed as part of Operation Condor (22).

In many ways, Steven Volk's chapter, "Chile and the United States Thirty Years Later" reverses the more common description of U.S.-Chilean relations by asking not what did the U.S. government do to Chile, but how did the Pinochet dictatorship "shape ... events and cultures in the United States" (24). This fascinating and very relevant chapter examines how September 11, both in Chile and in the United States, affected the quality of democracy in both countries. In both countries, Volk concludes, democracy has deteriorated. And in some ways, Chile helped to provide an example to the United States about how to use state power and fear to weaken democracy and people's yearnings for it. In the United States, as earlier in Chile, the government detained and tortured, undermined constitutionalism, and encouraged a socially indifferent and politically quiescent population. His brilliant essay shows that U.S. sponsorship of the coup in Chile was not just a crime inflicted on the Chilean people, but an example of the chickens coming home to roost.

Kevin Foster also shifts the focus by exploring the "Small Earthquakes and Major Eruptions: Anglo-Chilean Cultural Relations in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries". He shows how "Chile was deployed as a symbolic battlefield for the political and moral extremes in British politics" (48). For example, he discusses how the British Right, and to a lesser extent the Left, used the Pinochet economic model, and their claims of its success (and for the Left, its failures), to argue for a transformation in British economic policy and the election (or defeat) of Margaret Thatcher.

Marc Ensalaco's essay, "Pinochet, A Study in Impunity", addresses directly the issue of Pinochet's impunity. Ensalaco discusses the events surrounding the 1998 arrest of Pinochet in London, England and the subsequent legal (and political) developments that resulted in Pinochet's return to Chile, and, despite several ups and downs in the case, the Chilean legal system's ultimate decision that he can and should stand trial. Ensalaco's chapter offers some very interesting information about what he suggests were efforts by the administration of President Lagos (2000–2006) to influence Judge Guzmán (the Chilean judge who had initiated proceedings against Pinochet in 2000), and possibly other members of the Court of Appeals and Supreme Court, to rule against Pinochet coming to trial (125). Ensalaco concludes that if Pinochet is tried, and if the rule of law is restored in Chile, it will be because of the unremitting efforts of Chileans to "erode the factors that sustain ... impunity in Chile" (128). In other words, justice, which is a *sine qua non* of any democratic government, is the result of public pressure, not government benevolence.

Volker Frank, Fernando Leiva, Diane Haughney, Patricia Tomic, and Ricardo Trumper also question the ruling Concertación governments' commitment to justice (both legal and economic) and the extent to which full democracy has been restored in Chile. Frank's chapter, "Integration without Real Participation" points out that the labor movement was central to building the anti-Pinochet mobilizations that ultimately led to the military's defeat; it was also the social class that suffered some of the heaviest economic and political assaults during the dictatorship. Frank argues that far from rewarding the Chilean labor movement for its central contributions to the anti-dictatorial struggle, and for being one of the key forces that, after all, made it possible for the Concertación to come to power, the governments have, by and large, continued the neoliberal economic policies that have had such a debilitating impact on the

Chilean working class and its organizations. He makes the devastating, and unfortunately all-too-accurate observation that, “time has run backwards for the Chilean labor movement and Chilean workers, and the balance of power is where it was almost a century ago” (60).

The Mapuche population has not fared much better under the Concertación governments. The neoliberal economic policies initiated by the Pinochet dictatorship, and continued by the Concertación governments, have encouraged the production of goods for export. One key product is wood, which in the 1980s “had become the third most important earner of foreign exchange” (89). Much of Chilean wood is found on Mapuche land, so part of the Chilean state’s efforts have focused on stripping the Mapuches of any land claims and privatizing that land so that its products can be sold abroad. While Haughney helpfully explains government strategy to gain control of Mapuche land, one of her significant contributions is her discussion of the changing politics and identity of the Mapuche movement. In response to government indifference at best and assaults at worst, the Mapuche movement has evolved. Prior to 1973, they primarily struggled for a “restoration of community lands.” Now, “Mapuche activists stress collective political and economic rights, on the grounds of being a distinct people—*not Chileans*” (emphasis added) (96). Although Haughney does not mention it, it would be interesting to explore to what extent the upsurge in indigenous struggles throughout the Americas since 1992 has affected the Mapuche’s increased radicalization and assertion of their identity as a distinct people.

Fernando Leiva’s chapter, “From Pinochet’s State Terrorism to the ‘Politics of Participation’” contrasts the Concertación’s attempts to convince Chileans to embrace neoliberalism with the more repressive tactics employed by the military to force them to do so. This very interesting chapter analyzes how these governments

have employed the concepts of “civil society,” “citizen participation,” and “social capital,” to encourage Chileans to see themselves as fully integrated into and consumers of the neoliberal market economy that the government promotes. However, as Leiva clearly points out, the depth of participation goes only so far, since most Chileans do not fully or even partially participate in the decision-making bodies that affect their lives, be they educational, work or health related, or political. As Leiva concludes, Concertación politics and discourse aim not at strengthening democracy but are “part of a hegemonic project of legitimizing neoliberal restructuring” (83). This was a fascinating and provocative chapter, which could have been strengthened by a deeper discussion of the mechanisms and policies the government used to further its goals. Leiva also notes that despite the government’s best efforts, there were “serious internal tensions and inconsistencies” as a result of its policies (81). Although Leiva’s space was restricted, I would like to know what these tensions and inconsistencies were and how they manifested themselves.

In “Higher Education in Chile Thirty Years after Salvador Allende”, Tomic and Trumper raise important questions about the state of higher education in Chile. They survey the changes that took place during the dictatorship, principally the “modernization” of higher education, which meant the proliferation of private universities, a trend that continues today. International educational businesses, such as Laureate Education Inc. (formerly Sylvan Learning Systems) have invested heavily, and profitably, in Chilean education. In 2003, Laureate’s global revenue was \$472,806, of which \$97,585 came from Chile (104). While the increased number of universities could appear to be positive, the reality is that many of them are profit driven and, as a result, fail to support research or have trained faculty or adequate scholarly materials such as library books. As a result, more Chileans can attend colleges, but the education they receive in them is inferior and does not prepare them

to obtain either a financially rewarding or personally fulfilling career. In addition, several religious/political bodies have established their own universities in order to further their own, frequently conservative, agendas. The upshot is that many young Chileans do make it into universities, but “they end up in programs that are expensive and mostly irrelevant” (108).

Quite a few of the chapters used cultural productions to examine the impact of the military coup on Chile. While a number of these chapters were quite illuminating, several of them either failed to answer sufficiently the question they posed or were not clear, at least to me. Ornella Lepri Mazzuca, in “Alternative ‘Pasts’ in Post-Pinochet Chile” asks the important question of what is the interaction between history and fiction. However, I am not sure she ever really answers that question. She does have a very interesting discussion of Isabel Allende’s *My Invented Country*, but a clearer statement on the role of fiction in preserving, interrogating, or concealing memory, therefore history, would be most helpful. I was also unable to determine exactly what Andrea Bachner in “Re/Coiling Inscription: Incisive Moments in Diamela Eltit and Jacques Derrida” wanted to communicate to the reader. I was also not sure why this chapter was included in this collection, since it was not clear what relevance it had to the book’s overall theme of Chile thirty years after the military coup.

Several chapters addressed film, literature, and art as cultural narratives, political forces, and political representations. Three chapters specifically focused on film. In “Exporting Chile: Film and Literature after 1973” Amy Oliver showed how Chilean film and literature, produced both inside and outside of Chile, contributed to focusing international attention on Chile. She correctly criticizes the film version of *House of the Spirits*, primarily for the bad casting (and, I would add, for its confusing politics and misrepresentation of

Chile and Chileans in general) and lauds the far superior film, *Missing*.

Jeffrey R. Middents offers an interesting analysis of *Chile, memoria obstinada* (a film that I reviewed¹). He makes the intriguing point that *me moría* and *memoria* differ only in terms of accent, an observation that he thinks is appropriate because the subjects of Guzmán's film (the victim's of the Pinochet dictatorship) "are asked to confront death and torture" (185). Although Middents contrasts favorably *Chile, memoria obstinada* with Guzmán's earlier trilogy, *The Battle of Chile*, due to the former's greater seductiveness and winning appeal to nostalgia, I believe that comparing the two films is a bit like contrasting apples and oranges. *The Battle of Chile* is an incredible film, one of the few films to ever capture the politicization and democratic awakening and empowerment of the working classes and poor. As such, it is an immensely powerful and optimistic film. *Chile, Obstinate Memory* is a profoundly pessimistic film, because it is a reckoning of a defeat and the terrible scars that loss has left on the Chilean people.

Kristin Sorensen's chapter "Reception and Censorship of a Chilean Documentary: *The Plight of Fernando is Back*", is an interesting discussion of this film, which records "the official findings of the research team at the Medical Legal Institute in Santiago" as they discuss what the medical evidence offered by the skeleton of Fernando Olivares Mori reveals about the torture he suffered prior to his death (193). As Sorenson points out, the film has never been shown on Chilean TV as a result of the media censorship that still holds sway to some extent in Chile. One of the more fascinating aspects of her chapter is the appendix, which contains the transcriptions of her interviews with three Chileans, prior to and

¹ Margaret Power, "Review of *Chile, Obstinate Memory*," H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews, September, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=70>

after viewing the film. What struck me the most about these interviews is that the film, which all three agree was very powerful and convincing, did not seem to shake their fundamental beliefs. Two of the interviewees, one of whom supported Pinochet while the other supported the Popular Unity government, opposed showing it on public TV, albeit for slightly different reasons, while the third, an active member of the Communist Party, strongly supported its viewing. Sorenson herself seems to ponder the meaning of this response when she asks, “What do viewer responses to *Fernando is Back* tell us about the role of documentaries and other types of media in re-constructing and re-conceptualizing historical memory?” (196). Unfortunately, she does not answer this tantalizing question.

Gregory J. Lobo offers a fascinating discussion of a fairly unknown Chilean writer, José Miguel Varas, whose works have recently been republished by *LOM Ediciones*. Lobo focuses on *El correo de Bagdad*, a novel that I am unfamiliar with but which Lobo convinced me that I should certainly read. The novel’s protagonist is a Mapuche artist who, through the course of the novel, comes to identify with the Iraqi Kurds, undergoes a shift in his geopolitical vision, and ultimately embodies what Lobo defines as Varas’s “red nationalism” (155), which is a global unity of those who don’t have enough in recognition of and opposition to those who have too much, “and will stop at nothing to keep it that way” (161).

“Ephemeral Histories: Public Art as Political Practice in Santiago, Chile, 1970-1973” by Camilo Trumper examines the interrelationship between urban politics and public art, specifically the political murals that leftist brigades painted on the walls of Santiago during the Popular Unity period. His chapter contains some fascinating analyses of different murals painted by these groups of urban artists (too bad the pictures of the murals were not reproduced in the text), and how this art helped to articulate and fashion political thought. For example, his discussion of posters

dealing with the nationalization of Chilean copper illustrates the essential unity the artists developed between their visual portrayal of Anaconda Copper Company (one of the U.S. copper companies that owned Chilean copper) as a serpent strangling Chile and the textual messages that called on Chileans to defend Chilean copper. Surprisingly, Trumper ignores the gendered construction of the fist, which was typically masculine, as an “emblem of community, resistance, and determination” (149). As a result, he fails to mention how much of the Chilean art that appeared during this period reflected and/or reinforced stereotyped ideas about masculinity and femininity. Trumper makes a clear argument as to the meaning and power of visual art during the Popular Unity period, but he overstates his case when he writes that “Allende fought and won the presidential election through the murals and posters displayed in Santiago’s public sphere” (142). This artwork may have contributed to Allende’s victory (although Trumper fails to offer evidence that it did); however, it was the program of the Popular Unity and the mobilization of the left that ensured Allende’s victory.

Julia Carrol’s chapter, “The Marginal on the Inside: Nannies and Maids in Chilean Cultural Production (1982-2000)”, uses the figure of the maid, or domestic employee, in three different texts to illustrate the social unease that unequal power relations in Chile during the last two decades (the period of her study) evoked. This is a very engrossing study of how the domestic worker, who as her title notes is both marginal to the powerful and inhabits that very center of power, is a symbol of the “asymmetrical power relations” that defined Chilean society during the dictatorship, and continue to shape relationships today. Interestingly, the most pessimistic portrayal of the maid comes from Elizabeth Subercaseaux’s 2000 novel, *La rebelión de las nanas*, which was written ten years after the restoration of democracy. In a mordant commentary on the state of that democracy, the novel ends when a crazed member of the Chilean

military kills three of the maids as they march through the streets of Santiago to protest their conditions (169).

It is fitting that the final words belong to Fabiola Letelier, who concludes the book with a powerful essay titled, “The Struggle for Truth and Justice in Chile and the Challenges of Latin American Democracy”. Fabiola Letelier has struggled for truth and justice for over thirty years, and in her concluding essay she shares some of the lessons she has drawn from her work. Above all, she emphasizes that people are the main protagonists of history and of their own struggles. She urges social and individual recognition of popular sovereignty and respect for human rights. Finally, she calls for social equality and the principle of solidarity among all peoples. These are important lessons and if they are the legacy of the military dictatorship, then those who died and those who suffered have not done so in vain.