

Review / Reseña

Woods, Maxwell. *On The Chilean Social Explosion*. London: Routledge, 2022. 215 pp.

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How can radical movements contest hegemony without themselves becoming hegemonic? Is it possible to broadly reconfigure the fabric of social relations without taking state power or creating new divisions that render some subjects subaltern? What role do cultural workers play in shaping political imaginaries that aspire to autonomy and horizontalism rather than sovereignty? Maxwell Woods's timely and compelling book *On the Chilean Social Explosion* offers an insightful analysis of these questions as they developed over the course of the *estallido social* (social explosion) that gripped Chile from October 2019 to March 2020. Contrary to those who interpret the social explosion as an uncoordinated eruption of discontent waiting to be channeled into a coherent social project, Woods argues that Chilean protesters and cultural workers were enacting autonomous political formations more closely aligned with Occupy, the Zapatista uprising, and the 2001 Argentinian protests than with the constituent process that recently attempted to re-write Chile's constitution. The cultural production of the Chilean social explosion offers emergent solutions to the challenge of building a "post-patriarchal, post-hegemonic, post-State, post-colonial, post-neoliberal world

constituted by interdependent autonomous collectivities” that resonate far beyond its geographic and temporal borders (167).

Woods, a professor in the Department of Literature at Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez in Viña del Mar, Chile, experienced the social explosion firsthand. Arguing against “emerging narratives in which the social explosion has been explained exclusively in terms of discontent rooted in economic inequality,” he proposes that this event is better understood as “a cultural struggle by the subaltern to creatively activate new modes of expression in order to be heard within a social landscape constructed for the purposes of denying them a voice” (3). The subaltern’s attempt to be heard by the elite need not constitute a counter-wager for domination. Rather, Woods argues that “the social explosion represents the attempt to generate a cultural environment in which no subject (collective or individual) is elite or subaltern” (4). Such an arrangement would not reinforce or mirror the power of the state but contribute to the construction of *autonomy*, defined as “the prefigurative politics of imagining and actualizing alternative horizontalist modes of coordinating social relations in which there is no distinction between ruler and ruled, governor and governed, those with power and those subjected to power” (6).

On the Chilean Social Explosion joins recent monographs by Magalí Rabasa, Freya Schiwy, Livia Stone, and Jennifer Ponce de León that highlight the role of cultural workers in autonomous movements. Conversing with foundational writings on autonomy by Raúl Zibechi, Hakim Bey, Ana Cecilia Dinerstein, John Holloway, and Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar, among others, the book confronts the complexities and contradictions of thinking through the relationship of autonomous politics to the state. Moving away from the positions of Bey and Zibechi respectively, Woods draws from Judith Butler’s critique of violence and Priyamvada Gopal’s reading of Fanon to reconceive autonomy in terms of “constitutive interdependency” (12). The question for autonomous politics is not “defending spaces of autonomy” (as Bey proposes) or “smashing the State” (in Zibechi’s formulation), but rather identifying “what forms of force illuminate our interdependence” (12). Thus conceived, autonomy calls on us to “reconsider such force as a call for representatives of the State and capitalism to acknowledge their interdependence with others and to reconfigure their way of engaging the world in a way that recognizes this interdependence” (12). This is one of the book’s most illuminating theoretical contributions, suggesting that autonomous politics can be conceived as simultaneously separate from, opposed to, and in communication with the state.

These arguments are further developed in Chapter 1 (“On the Barricade”) through a study of graffiti art and Danny Reveco’s street mural *Chile se acabó* (Chile’s Over). A crucial feature of Woods’s theory of autonomous politics is that it is “inherently a *post-hegemonic* politics”: that is, autonomy works toward “not only the annihilation of political society, but the reconfiguration of civil society in a way that no longer seeks to unify a social body through the voice of a cultural leader and through the organizing activity of a community leader” (16). To illustrate such a formation, Woods considers the protest tactic of barricading as a “political locus” which, rather than serving as “a means for a unified collective to assert its univocal agency,” instead weaves together “a variety of collective assertions of agencies and dignities” (32). *Chile se acabó* resolves the impasse posed by autonomy’s relation to the state by both “communicat[ing] with the people as if the State...did not exist” and “identify[ing] the barricade as the contact zone between the State and autonomous organizing” (45).

Chapter 2 (“On Public Transport as Public Space”) contextualizes the 2019 social explosion by proposing that it emerged from “alternative subaltern worlds that were silenced and suppressed, but never eliminated, by post-dictatorship neoliberalism” (55). Woods uses Pedro Lemebel’s writings on public transport in peripheral neighborhoods of Santiago to demonstrate that the fare-evasion movement of October 2019, which ignited the social explosion, “can be understood as the occupation of public space based on already existing autonomous cultures of public transport” (55). The notion that neoliberal hegemony only suppressed—but did not eliminate—other popular and subaltern cultures resurfaces in Chapter 5 (“On Myth”), which examines how the social explosion revitalized a “grassroots nationality” rooted in various myths of collective memory: the Baquedano torture center, the romanticized figures of Víctor Jara and Gladys Marín, and *negro matapacos*. In contrast to Lemebel’s plural cartography of Santiago’s peripheries or the non-hegemonic collectivities depicted in Reveco’s barricade, this grassroots nationality “glued together the subaltern into an identifiable, coherent, and singular collectivity” and consequently “undermined any possibility for international solidarity” or alliances with Chile’s immigrant community (126). The proliferation of national symbols placed the social explosion at the intersection of two competing agendas: “the mission to cohere around a national project *versus* the breaking apart of nationality itself in order to make room for new modes of living in common” (139).

However, the diverse subjects who constituted the “leftovers” of this resurgent nationalism forged their own senses of collectivity. This is most clearly demonstrated

in Chapter 4 (“On Collectivization”), a marvelous study of different approaches to coordinating subaltern collectivities in Daniela Catrileo’s short-story collection *Piñen*, LASTESIS’s performance *Un violador en tu camino*, Cheril Linett’s *La yeguada latinoamericana* and the Catrileo+Carrión community’s project *Poyewün Nüttram*. Catrileo’s writings, published on the eve of the social explosion, signal the need to identify ways of forming a collective subaltern force “without the collectivity itself subalternizing another population” (103). This ideal is pursued to varying degrees of success by LASTESIS, Linett, and Catrileo+Carrión. In a nuanced discussion of LASTESIS’s manifesto, Woods argues that while the performance group “convenes women and sexual dissidents,” it does not analyze “the friction among these various social positions,” such as “the misogyny within queer male communities, trans- and homophobia within feminist communities...and racism, xenophobia, and nationalism in all those communities” (105). Similarly, the forms of trans-species subjectivation explored in Linett’s work do not engage with Black feminist contributions to moving beyond the “genre of man,” leaving open the question of how Black modes of being would fit into her vision of political collectivity.

In an exemplary demonstration of self-reflexivity, Woods turns these critiques back onto the book itself. His critique of LASTESIS is “also a self-critique” of *On the Chilean Social Explosion*: if the book “sees itself as convening voices of the leftovers in an autonomous network, it is functionally...setting up a tentative cultural canon of the social explosion...Like LASTESIS, this book presents itself as an autonomous coordination of social explosion voices, but implicitly constructs a social-explosion collective that valorizes certain voices and ignores others” (107).

The remaining sections examine how other artists attempted to engage with the uprising of Chile’s “leftovers.” Chapter 3 (“On Water”) highlights the participation of the Valparaíso-based sound art collective Tsonami and artists affiliated with the Coordinador Acción Comunal (CAC) in efforts to construct “an *autonomous* and *horizontalist* administration of water” and reimagine “the non-hegemonic role of art in this political project” (75). The cultural figures discussed in Chapter 6 (“On the Middle Class”)—the poet Luis Sanfuentes and well-known playwright Ariel Dorfman—struggled more acutely than Tsonami and the CAC to position themselves in alliance with the non-hegemonic subjectivities that became visible during the social explosion. While Sanfuentes’s poem *Paraman* “represents the possibility for the social explosion to be an insurgent moment led by and for the leftovers of Chile that then enters into dialogue with the middle classes and the elite,” Dorfman’s opinion columns reflect

another line of thought that “seeks to recenter the social explosion around the middle class” (157). Rather than disparage Dorfman, Woods productively engages Dorfman’s writings as texts that are “seriously struggling with the tension between middle-class cultural values and the emerging subaltern voice that threatens that socio-cultural paradigm” (158).

Many of the political projects set in motion during the social explosion were cut short by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. In the conclusion, Woods insists that “a political solution was slowly starting to emerge near the close of the social explosion,” one that “was hinting at a mode of social coordination based on orchestrating the polycentric and decentralized cooperation of a horizontalist network of autonomous assemblies, *cabildos*, and community organizations” (176-77). This alternative form of politics was also truncated by the constitutional convention process of 2021-2022, which Woods considers fundamentally flawed because it sought to “take a horizontalist, decentralized, autonomous politics and make it work within hierarchical, centralized, institutionalized politics” (178). Perhaps this structural mismatch is part of the reason why the campaign to re-write the Chilean constitution failed. The referendum process that resulted in a vote to preserve the Pinochet-era constitution over a proposal drafted by the democratically-elected constituent assembly unfolded in a field defined by hegemony politics: in attempting to channel the demands of the social explosion into institutionalized political structures, the Left pursued a counter-hegemonic project that came up short against the fear campaign waged by the Right.

What remains uncertain is how dissident political forces can both disrupt hegemonic paradigms without engaging in counter-hegemonic politics *and* make their visions of collectivity the primary way in which the world is organized. The latter requires affecting, coordinating, and ideologically persuading people who are not on board with projects which are often conceived in terms of hegemony. Woods writes that “post-hegemonic sociality is reconfigured around *co-generated relationality* or *interdependency* rather than *shared hegemonic meaning*” (17). But isn’t the struggle by autonomous movements to become “the principal way through which our everyday social relations are coordinated” also predicated on the production of some sense of shared meaning? A more sustained dialogue with John Beasley-Murray’s theory of affect and habitus in post-hegemonic politics, or Ponce de León’s discussion of how aesthetic interventions alter the sensory fabric of perception would be interesting places to begin thinking about the intersubjective mechanics of articulating autonomy on larger scales.

On the Chilean Social Explosion is a nuanced, well-researched and theoretically intriguing account of Chile's recent uprising. Woods makes an original case for close reading as a methodology that is particularly well-suited to the study of autonomous politics, as it reflects "an ethical relation" founded on "the interdependency between author, text, and reader" (23). *On the Chilean Social Explosion* is not an exhaustive overview of cultural production related to this brief historical moment, yet its attempt to "carefully, intentionally and profoundly listen" to a handful of voices based in Santiago and Valparaíso speaks to a wide range of theoretical and thematic concerns (23). Woods's analysis of autonomy, post-hegemony, and the role of cultural workers in social movements will undoubtedly interest scholars across disciplines including literature, visual culture, and performance studies; gender and sexuality studies; political theory; and the environmental humanities.