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## **Review/Reseña**

Steve J. Stern. *Remembering Pinochet's Chile: On the Eve of London 1998*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004)

## **Polyphonic Memories: Pinochet's Dictatorship in the Collective Imagination**

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*Remembering Pinochet's Chile*, the first book in a trilogy that studies how Chileans have struggled to define both individual and collective memories of political violence that occurred under the Pinochet regime (1973-1990), is a valuable addition to a burgeoning literature on Chile's dictatorial and post-dictatorial periods. Historian Steve Stern, acknowledging the contributions of numerous social scientists who, since the 1980s, have paved the way for our current understanding of Latin America's authoritarian regimes and

their neoliberal legacies, sets as his primary goal to place a “human face” on Chile’s memory saga. Stern wants to unveil and critically examine the often-ignored intimate and personal dimensions of memory scripts (and their accompanying silences), and to understand how individual memory lore interfaces with and shapes broader collective narratives of the Pinochet years. The author’s “hearts and minds” approach to the construction and analysis of historical memory is perhaps his most valuable contribution to the scholarly literature on contemporary Chile. Whereas other scholars have primarily focused their critical gaze on memories of Chile’s major political and cultural figures, Stern strives to show how “average” Chileans from different walks of life (ethnicities, social classes, geographical positions and ideological tendencies) assimilate the traumas of their country’s recent past.

The book focuses on one crucial historical juncture in the trajectory of Chile’s democratic transition: the moment in 1998 just prior to Pinochet’s arrest by Scotland Yard (October 16, 1998). At this juncture, Stern argues, Chile had reached a “memory impasse” in which competing visions of the Pinochet years seemed irreconcilable with one other. While a significant minority viewed Pinochet and his economic reforms as keys to the nation’s “salvation” from communist rule, many others saw him as a criminal who had built a repressive neoliberal economy on the cadavers of more than 3,000 *desaparecidos* and on the indelibly scarred bodies of more than 30,000 torture victims.<sup>1</sup> By the mid-to-late 1990s, Chile’s “memory box” was full of competing lenses through which to view the past: stories of political violence waged against former left-wing militants

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<sup>1</sup> In 1998, more than two fifths of Chileans still viewed Pinochet as a hero. This image would not change significantly until after Pinochet’s London arrest and the subsequent charges of financial misdealing leveled against him in the recent Riggs Bank scandal (2004). The 40% support that Stern attributes to Pinochet in 1998 is now around 18%. This new data comes from a poll conducted by Chile’s *Centro de Estudios de la Realidad Contemporánea* (CERC) between July 27 and August 6, 2006.

co-existed “alongside political belief that Pinochet, the military and their social base of supporters and sympathizers remained too strong for Chile to take logical ‘next steps’ along the road of truth and justice” (xxix). “The result,” Stern argues, “was not so much a culture of forgetting, as a culture that oscillated—as if caught in moral schizophrenia—between prudence and convulsion” (xxix). Only after 1998 has this memory impasse been significantly assuaged. In the last several years, particularly since the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the September 11<sup>th</sup> coup (2003), we have seen a number of important and positive reforms: for example, the publication of the *Informe de la Comisión Nacional sobre Prisión Política y Tortura* (commonly referred to as the *Informe Valech*), changes to Pinochet’s 1980 Constitution that eliminate authoritarian enclaves within the government, public admissions of human rights violations by all branches of the armed forces, trials and convictions of both high and low-ranking military officers, Pinochet’s loss of judicial immunity in landmark cases such as the “Caravan of Death,” and the election of Michelle Bachelet (a former victim of the Pinochet regime) as Chile’s first female president (2006).

The trajectory of Stern’s book follows an inductive logic approach that leads from specific case studies, interviews, document analyses and oral histories to a broader theoretical conceptualization of Chile’s competing memory frameworks. Contrary to what one normally finds in scholarly monographs, Stern consciously decides not to begin with theory, but rather hopes to guide readers through his fieldwork toward a series of conceptual tools that he summarizes in the book’s final chapter. His theoretical model hinges on the intricate interplay between “loose” and “emblematic memories,” as well as on what he terms “memory knots” on the social body.

“Emblematic memories” circulate in public or semi-public domains (e.g. the media, art, political discourse, schools, churches, neighborhood groups, activist organizations, and other such vehicles)

and offer broad frameworks into which individuals can inscribe their personal experiences. Such narrative schematics, which purport to “capture essential truth[s] about the collective experience of society,” are broad and flexible enough to encompass an array of sufficiently differentiated, though generally related stories (113). They serve either as overarching scripts for writing history, or can be used as starting points for debates about the very construction of historical meaning.

In contrast to emblematic memory, “loose” memory is lore that floats diffusely on the cultural scene and cannot be easily assimilated into any of the major emblematic frameworks. Ambiguous cases of narratives that rupture emblematic molds abound in post-traumatic scenarios where “radical evil” has occurred. What, for example, can be done with certain “gray” cases like those of former left-wing militants who collaborated under torture or who, under duress, were co-opted by the dictatorial state’s bureaucratic apparatus? Moreover, where does the figure of the non-heroic, non-martyred victim fit into the “memory box” of Pinochet’s Chile? Stern rightly notes that many uncomfortable and bothersome “loose” memories such as these get silenced or pushed to the bottom of the box.

A final aspect of Stern’s theoretical model concerns the formation of “memory knots” on the social body. The metaphor of the “knot” is multifaceted: it refers to “sites of humanity, sites in time, and sites of physical matter or geography” that serve as detonators or conduits to facilitate the connection of loose lore to emblematic memory frames (121). Human beings who actively promote specific memory scripts, symbolic and controversial dates like September 11, unanticipated events like Pinochet’s London arrest, the creation of memorial spaces like the “Park for Peace” at Villa Grimaldi, or the recent re-naming of the Estadio Chile after folk singer Víctor Jara (murdered by the military on that site in 1974), all

serve as examples of knots that “[project] memory and polemics about memory into public space or imagination” (121). Identifying “memory knots” is precisely what allows us to isolate critically the moments and manners in which emblematic frames are made and unmade. Knots, in essence, are dynamic sites of change around which memories are both propagated and evolve.<sup>2</sup> From the notion of memory knots it becomes clear that the making of memory is an uneven process that unfolds “in fits and starts” (147). Sometimes when change is least expected, new memories can “irrupt” onto the political and cultural scene, thus amending how the past is viewed in the present.<sup>3</sup>

Stern identifies four major emblematic memory scripts in Chile prior to Pinochet’s arrest: memory as “salvation,” memory as “unresolved rupture,” memory as “persecution and awakening,” and memory as a “closed box.” He illustrates each of these by telling individual stories that either fit squarely within them or offer variations on a theme.

Chapter One highlights the classic *pinochetista* narrative of memory as “salvation.” The simplest version of this narrative holds that on September 11, 1973, Pinochet heroically rescued Chile from communist rule and an impending civil war; then, after 17 years of dictatorship, he returned the country to its original democratic path

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<sup>2</sup> In conceptual terms, Stern’s notion of the “memory knot” strikes me as an expansion of sociologist Elizabeth Jelin’s idea of the “memory entrepreneur,” extrapolated by Stern beyond the realm of human actors to encompass other memory “sites” (specifically, time and place). Jelin defines “memory entrepreneurs” as those “who seek social recognition and political legitimacy of *one* (their own) interpretation or narrative of the past. We also find [memory entrepreneurs] engaged and concerned with maintaining and promoting active and visible social and political attention on their enterprise” (Jelin 2003: 33-34). “Memory knots,” in contrast, encompass not only the promotion of memory scripts by entrepreneurs, but also the opening of critical spaces for *debates* about the past. The notion of debate consciously exceeds Jelin’s term precisely because memory entrepreneurs do not seek to have their positions debated. Rather, entrepreneurs want their memory scripts to be accepted as incontrovertible truth.

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent discussion of “irruptions of memory” during the early years of Chile’s democratic transition, see Wilde 1999.

with a healthy neoliberal economy. Stern presents the case of Doña Elena F. as a salient example of this perspective. Doña Elena's family, owners of an inherited patch of farmland, had been negatively affected by Eduardo Frei Montalva (President, 1964-1970) and Salvador Allende's (President, 1970-1973) land reform initiatives. As a result of Allende's policies, the family lost its land and its members were left bitter and enraged. September 11, 1973, was therefore a day of great celebration for Doña Elena. She views the military regime's human rights violations as a price that had to be paid in order to return Chile to its right (i.e., economically conservative) path.

Stern notes that the narrative of memory as salvation changed over time: "In the 1970s, many of its proponents simply denied the reality of secret executions, abductions leading to permanent disappearances, and torture sessions perpetrated by agents of the state. . . . It would not be until the 1990s . . . that the proponents of memory as salvation grudgingly conceded the reality of these events" (30). Torture, however, remained beyond the realm of discussion, and *pinochetistas* typically felt compelled to contextualize human rights violations historically as a necessary evil. Stern is also attentive to the ways in which children who were very young during the dictatorship became socialized by their families and community networks to remember in certain ways. He references the case of Gabriela, a young girl from Las Condes (the *barrio alto*) who, during the Allende years, became fearful of violence and the presence of unsavory people in her neighborhood. For Gabriela, Pinochet's rise to power meant that she and her family could live in peace. Regarding the issue of human rights, Gabriela, unlike Doña Elena, prefers not to contextualize the violations historically, but to ignore them outright as a problem "beyond solution" (37).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The *pinochetista* faction of Chile's population was not limited to the upper echelons of society. Pinochet supporters cut across class lines and defied age boundaries. For a glimpse into this phenomenon, Marcela Said's documentary film

Although Stern finds the “salvationist” argument offensive because of his own personal identification with the persecuted, he is careful to paint realistic portraits of his subjects without vilifying them unfairly.<sup>5</sup> As with all of Stern’s interviewees, the emblematic script to which Doña Elena adheres has everything to do with her own life experience. True, she explains away grave human rights violations as necessary evils, but she does so while repeatedly calling attention to her own sense of morality and social responsibility. References to Doña Elena’s devout Catholicism and her lifelong work with the Chilean poor permeate her narrative at every turn. Seemingly, she wants to convince Stern and others that Pinochet loyalists are not heartless monsters (33).

Chapter Two discusses the emblematic memory frames of “unresolved rupture” and “persecution and awakening.” In a 180 degree turn from narratives of salvation, stories of “unresolved rupture” view the coup as a cataclysmic catastrophe from which victims have never truly recovered. Torture, death, disappearance and exile left many Chileans and their loved ones with deep wounds that have never fully healed. Often memories of rupture are hyper-charged with emotion and tend to de-emphasize historical context. For a mother like Señora Herminda Morales (from the La Legua *población*), whose sons Gerardo and Ernestito were murdered by the

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*I Love Pinochet* (2002) is enlightening. Moreover, it should be noted that the *poblaciones* (poor neighborhoods on the periphery of Santiago) are not politically uniform spaces. They are full of diverse memories, experiences, emphases, reactions and explanations of political violence. Some residents of *poblaciones* opted for silence about the crimes committed. Others supported Pinochet without reservation. Still others were openly combative in the fight against the dictatorship.

<sup>5</sup> Stern writes: “Given that my own political values lean toward the Left, and given my sensibilities as a Jewish child of Holocaust survivors, the identification with the persecuted comes readily. I sit uneasily with remembrance as salvation. I confess that I do not care to understand *too* well the direct perpetrators of radical evil, and that at some level they exceed my capacity to understand. Yet as a historian undertaking a study of the ways memory issues play themselves out over time in Chile, I have a responsibility to include, in my quest for critical social analysis and understanding, the social base of people who supported military rule and who remember it as a time of personal and national salvation” (32).

military in 1974, political rationalizations regarding why her sons disappeared are entirely inconsequential. Her memory is visceral: she prefers to remember her sons positively as “peacemakers” within Chilean society. In situations such as this, Stern notes, “debate about the political choices made by the victim before 1973, or about the reasons Chile had reached a point of crisis by 1973, are either beside the point or perversely diversionary” (109). What matters is how a victim who has suffered profound loss manages to organize her life around an acceptable memory script that will permit her survival into the future.

The third emblematic framework— “persecution and awakening”—is related to “unresolved rupture,” yet evidences certain particularities. Whereas memory as rupture usually manifests in victims or their immediate social networks, memory as “persecution and awakening” garners a much wider group of adherents. Stern observes that stories of “persecution and awakening” most often surface in the lore of supporters of Chile’s *Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia* (a Center-Left governing coalition that has held power since Pinochet’s fall), or in the narratives of those who participated in some capacity (either through moral support or direct action) in the fight against the military regime. For those people, military rule was experienced as a “long winter of repression and self discovery” (109). Knowledge of horrible abuses against the citizenry gave rise to a nonconformist spirit of struggle that resulted in a renewal of social solidarity and paved the way for democratic transition. Given that many Chilean families were torn asunder by internal political divisions, those who focus on “persecution and awakening” find it easier to silence divisive memories of the Allende years and highlight instead what they see as the most positive social repercussion of life under dictatorship: the rebirth in the mid-1980s of a political solidarity, forged through collective action and protest, that was lost with the 1973 coup.



Chapter Three develops Stern's fourth and final emblematic memory frame: "memory as a closed box." This script holds that memories of political violence are too divisive and incendiary to be discussed openly in public. If Chile were to forge a democratic future founded on ideals like "consensus" and "reconciliation," truth and justice would have to be sacrificed in the interest of peaceful coexistence. Curiously, although this narrative largely prevails among right-wing *pinochetistas* who subscribe to the "salvationist" version of history described above, the idea of "closing the box" is by no means limited to Chile's conservative factions. In fact, throughout the transition, politicians of the *Concertación* and their Center-Left constituents have appealed incessantly to such arguments, noting that willed amnesia is in the nation's best interest. Especially in the pre-1998 period, when Pinochet's figure still loomed large on the national scene and the military remained a strong political actor and a perceived threat, many felt that true reconciliation meant urging victims and victimizers to place their differences aside, "turn the page" and "look toward the future."<sup>6</sup> Such future-oriented calls for reconciliation were pervasive in the *Concertación's* political discourse throughout the 1990s, and also in the politically conservative mass media.<sup>7</sup>

The most shocking of all the stories recounted in *Remembering Pinochet's Chile* is that of Cristián, a former military conscript from a humble socialist family. As Stern notes, "in 1973 about half of the soldiers in the Chilean army . . . were conscripts," many of whom came from communities that provided the political base for Allende's Popular Unity movement (138). Cristián was called into active duty in March 1973 and, following the coup, was assigned to patrol Santiago's streets during curfew hours or occasionally to

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<sup>6</sup> For an excellent analysis that equates the notions of "reconciliation" and "consensus" to "forgetting," see Moulián 1997.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed discussion of the discourse of reconciliation in Chile's transition, see Loveman and Lira 2000.

participate in raids (*allanamientos*) and arrests of suspected “subversives.” One night in late 1973, Cristián was assigned to a unit sent to arrest a local shantytown labor leader. During the raid, his commanding lieutenant lost his composure, broke the labor leader’s son’s jaw and ordered another conscript to kill the man’s wife. When the conscript refused the order, the lieutenant became irate and killed the conscript. Witnessing this atrocity affected Cristián forever. He was ashamed that he did nothing to stop the mistreatment of the labor leader’s family or to impede the killing of his fellow soldier. Moreover, because he felt duty-bound to the military, Cristián was compelled to sacrifice his moral values, betray his family-instilled socialist loyalties, and live forever after with the consequences. He “is a stark reminder that [Chile’s] process of memory struggle left little effective room for one potential voice: conscripts and low-rank troops who experienced fright, coercion, rupture—and remorse” (152). Cristián’s dramatic life story—and forgotten memory—begs asking how many other memory stories remain “loose” in post-Pinochet Chile, unable to anchor themselves in predominant emblematic frameworks or gain resonance in the collective imagination. As Stern rightly observes, “the making of memory is also the making of silence” (149).

Because his book relies heavily on oral interviews, Stern includes an “Essay on Sources” at the end of the text that gives insight into how he carried out his ethnographic research and how he dealt with his interviewees. Rather than rigidly scripting interview questionnaires, Stern preferred to use an open ended, dynamic interview structure that would allow interviewees to tell their stories freely, but that would also confront them, whenever necessary, with uncomfortable (yet respectful) questions about their positions. Interviewees were drawn from a wide variety of social classes, political tendencies, memory camps, and degrees of connection to direct repression (228). Stern also sought to include a diversity of

perspectives and layers of experience taken from *within* broader groups such as “victims” and “perpetrators.” He spoke not only with upper-echelon military leaders, but also with lower-level conscripts like Cristián; not only with human rights activists, but also with victims of repression who were not at the vanguard of political activism. The results of his fieldwork (conducted in 1996 and 1997) are 93 interviews that do an excellent job of representing a broad social spectrum. Stern’s cross section of Chileans, however, is not meant to be exhaustive. As he admits, for practical, logistical reasons certain voices remained beyond the scope of his project. For example, the fact that he focuses mainly on Santiago’s greater metropolitan area begs a more detailed exploration of the traumatic memories of Chile’s Mapuche population and other rural communities—though, to be fair, Stern’s book does include several fascinating references to Chile’s northern and southern regions and signals the possibility that scholars will find differences in how these communities remember the dictatorship. How might Mapuche lore coincide with or diverge from the emblematic frames Stern describes? The question is an important one that will certainly lead to further scholarly inquiry. As Stern points out, excellent work on Chilean rural experiences is already being done by researchers like Claudio Barrientos, Leslie Jo Frazier, Florencia Mallon and Heidi Tinsman (229). He suggests that readers look to the work of these scholars to compensate for certain gaps that inevitably remained in his study.

One of the most interesting aspects of Stern’s book is his own subjective presence in it. Unlike some historians who mask their ethnographic gaze behind a generic third person voice, Stern is not afraid to say “I,” to obviate his personal motivations and subjective implication in his study. In several passages, he notes that he is a “second-generation Holocaust survivor” (32, 65, 86, 232). His Polish grandfather, Shlomo Rosenzweig, perished at Auschwitz (86).

Though the author does not include specific details about his family's experience, he tries to draw responsibly upon his familial link to the Holocaust in order to articulate his political sympathies more convincingly and to establish relationships of credibility and confidence with his interlocutors:

The fact that I am a second-generation Holocaust survivor, and that this aspect of my family history has shaped me to the core of my soul—my sense of self, my social sympathies, my anxieties and ideals—made me feel most at ease with persecuted people who passed through intense life-and-death experiences. I did not use my Holocaust background crudely or wave a banner of horror (tender loyalties to my own relatives and their memory preclude such vulgar instrumentalism), but it is also true that in some instances my Holocaust background provided a bridge of credibility, empathy, and intuitions useful in conversation. In the end, and although this may sound strange to others, I am most “at home” with people who have experienced or witnessed social injustice or violent persecution. (232)

As a historian, Stern feels that it is his ethical responsibility to bear witness “by proxy” to the disappeared victims (and survivors) whose stories he recounts (Levi 1988). At the same time, it is clear that through the act of writing he is also trying to work through his own familial relationship to the “radical evil” of the Holocaust. To carry out his analytical work effectively, Stern must first play the role of “empathic listener” to his interviewees (Laub 1992). For example, after listening to the gut-wrenching testimony of Cristián—the military conscript who felt ashamed of how he betrayed his convictions—Stern writes that “Cristián *and I* had touched bottom” [emphasis mine] (141). By virtue of his presence, Stern creates a space in which Cristián can work through his trauma and, by extension, through which he can work through his own.

Yet, to be clear, Stern's desire is not simply to be a conduit through which Chilean witnesses can relay their memory stories. His book, more importantly, offers compelling analyses of certain

historical scenarios. (In this sense, Stern's discussion of the rise of the Chilean left and the reasons for Allende's fall are particularly noteworthy.) Always subjecting his interviewees' empirical "truths" to critical appraisal, the author aims not to turn memory into history, or to pit memory against history, but to write a *history of memory*. The way events are remembered by different social actors in different historical moments—the stasis and mutability of their narratives—constitutes his main area of interest. It is this focus on writing a *history of memory* that makes Stern's book both an indispensable reference and a model for future research on Chile and other post-authoritarian scenarios.

The first volume in the "Memory Box" trilogy has left me looking forward to the next two, which plan to "undertake the historical analysis proper of memory struggles as they unfolded in time" (xxx). Volume Two, *Battling for Hearts and Minds: Memory Struggles in Pinochet's Chile, 1973-1988*, is due out very soon and will trace the development of Chile's memory saga throughout the dictatorship years. Stern intends to show how "dissident memory" evolved from isolated pockets of resistance in the 1970s into the massive protests of the mid-to-late 1980s that instigated the dictatorship's demise. Volume Three, *Reckoning with Pinochet: The Memory Question in Democratic Chile, 1989-2001*, will focus on struggles for truth and justice during the transition to democracy, and will include the critical period after Pinochet's 1998 arrest. These latter two volumes will, in effect, contextualize the 1998 "memory impasse" described in Volume One, expanding the historical time horizon both backward and forward.

Because of its accessible language, its historical insight, and its theoretical usefulness for thinking about the often nebulous concept of "collective memory," *Remembering Pinochet's Chile* is necessary reading for both specialized scholars and students at all levels who

are interested in post-dictatorship issues or processes of collective memory formation.

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