



Vol. 6, No. 3, Spring 2009, 272-279

www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente

Review/ Reseña

Luis E. Cárcamo-Huechante. *Tramas del mercado: imaginación económica, cultura pública y literatura en el Chile de fines del siglo veinte*. Santiago de Chile: Editorial Cuarto Propio, 2007.

Neoliberalism and Chile's Public Imagination

Michael J. Lazzara

University of California—Davis

Economics are the method, but the object is to change the soul.
—Margaret Thatcher¹

At its core, the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile (1973-1990) was an economic project whose aim was to radically transform society from a

¹ Quoted in Harvey (2005): 23. I would like to thank Tamara Spira for calling my attention to this quote, as well as for our enriching conversations on neoliberalism's psycho-affective economies. Of course, it is well known that Margaret Thatcher was a stalwart supporter of the Pinochet regime. For her position on Pinochet, see chapter 7 of Thatcher (2003).

welfare state model (*el estado benefactor*) to a neoliberal economy governed by the free market. This project, of course, brought with it intense racial and class discrimination, particularly against the popular classes who were persecuted for their revolutionary imaginings or their connections to Allende's Popular Unity government (1970-1973). Pinochet's methods for reprogramming Chilean souls and for quelling revolutionary desires are well known: torture, murder, forced disappearance, and exile. These methods have been widely documented, but are worth reiterating since, as Elaine Scarry pointed out in the mid 1980s, torture aims to "unmake" the prisoner's world and destroy subjectivity, thus setting the stage for the reprogramming of hearts, minds, and bodies.² Within a "state of exception" and with violence and fear as its chief weapons, the Pinochet regime carried out its "structural adjustment" of the Chilean state, promoting (and actively marketing) values like individualism, competition, consumerism, and privatization. Shockingly, no developing nation on earth experienced such a radical structural transformation in such a short amount of time.

The critical literature focusing on Chile during the dictatorship and transition periods has observed, from various disciplinary angles, that Chile's national psyche was profoundly changed by the introduction of the free market model. In her book, *La revolución empresarial chilena* (1997), for example, sociologist Cecilia Montero, notes that all of Chilean society "has been impregnated by a certain logic of the market" (342).³ Likewise, sociologist Tomás Moulián's widely-read essay *Chile actual: anatomía de un mito* (1997) argues, from a Marxist perspective, that the Pinochet regime and the Concertación governments "disciplined" Chileans by turning them into "credit-card citizens" obsessed with maintaining appearances and driven by individualistic desires (102). Moulián affirms that, in general, Chilean subjectivity today is largely defined by materialistic concerns, a condition that reflects the deep symbolic penetration of consumerism into the social fabric. More recently, political scientists Eduardo Engel and Patricio Navia, in *Que gane "el más mejor": mérito y competencia en el Chile de hoy* (2006), defend the thesis that Chile today is

² See Scarry (1985).

³ The reference to Montero appears in Cárcamo's book in footnote 181 (239).

governed by competition in almost every area of society, from politics to business, from the workplace to education. Furthermore, other scholars working in the areas of cultural studies, political science, and literary studies—Nelly Richard, Manuel Antonio Garretón, Idelber Avelar, and Francine Masiello, for example—have highlighted the nefarious effects of neoliberalism on Chilean subjectivity.⁴

Building on these studies, Luis E. Cárcamo-Huechante's insightful book *Tramas del mercado: imaginación económica, cultura pública y literatura en el Chile de fines del siglo veinte* goes beyond simply pointing out the effects of Pinochet's neoliberal transformation and instead tries to unveil its *processes*. The book describes very convincingly how the Pinochet regime succeeded in instilling and legitimizing the free market as a set of values (and a way of life) that became emblazoned in Chile's public imagination. Beginning with the premise that Chile's "structural adjustment" also brought with it a "cultural adjustment and/or a cultural turn," Cárcamo argues that the "free market became a cultural discourse which, thanks to a series of rhetorical and imaginary interventions [promoted from the upper echelons of military power, soon] became hegemonic in society" (17). His methodology, rooted in semiotics and discourse analysis, takes a transdisciplinary approach that dialogues closely with the practice of *cultural critique* as espoused by scholars like Nelly Richard.⁵ Cárcamo's study describes the penetration of neoliberalism into the Chilean imagination by examining a rich, interdisciplinary constellation of texts that includes instances of economic discourse, political or public discourse, and literary fiction. This approach is useful insofar as it allows the reader to grasp the market's complex and pervasive *tramas* (weblike emplotments) as well as its far-reaching and overwhelming scope.

Chapter one focuses on Milton Friedman's speech, "Chile y su despegue económico," delivered at Santiago's Diego Portales building on March 26, 1975. Cárcamo considers Friedman's intervention—which he situates within the genre of the "sermon"—to be seminal insofar as it performatively "preached" the need for Chile to embrace the free market.

⁴ See Richard (1998), Garretón (2007), Avelar (1999), and Masiello (2001).

⁵ In fact, Cárcamo's book is part of the "Serie Crítica Cultural" that Nelly Richard edits for Editorial Cuarto Propio.

During Pinochet's reign, Friedman traveled to Chile on several occasions to teach the military, policy makers, and business elites about the merits of neoliberalism; likewise, Pinochet sent a group of his closest economic advisers, known as the "Chicago Boys," to be educated by Friedman at the University of Chicago. In 1975, when Friedman visited Chile, the Pinochet regime was still struggling to articulate a clear vision of the economic model it would follow. Consequently, Friedman's text, which employed numerous biological and physiological metaphors, helped convince the military that Chilean society was "sick," like a patient in need of "shock therapy" (103). (This shock therapy, as we know, was carried out quite literally on the bodies of so-called "subversives.") The *savior-economist* became a complement to the *savior-dictator* (Pinochet) who liberated the nation from the throes of Marxism; his job was to rescue an "incompetent society" in desperate need of an economic, surgical intervention (71).⁶ Yet the savior-economist would not only contribute scientific know-how; equally or more importantly, he would be a master rhetorician (a preacher) capable of indoctrinating his listeners in the virtues of the free market. Friedman's speech drove home the idea that the free market is not just a set of economic policies, but also a kind of "social fiction" that, in order to succeed, needs to penetrate the public imagination deeply and become, in effect, the *raison d'être* of culture (249).

The transition to democracy in the 1990s forced Chile's political elites to elaborate memory narratives that would favorably position the nation within a global economy. Because of the heavy weight of Pinochet's deplorable human rights record, politicians of the "New Right," particularly those with historical links and affinities to *pinochetismo*, decided to silence the horrors of the past while marketing an image of Chile as an "economic tiger" and a miraculously transformed Latin American nation. Critical of such memory narratives and attentive to their nuances and silences, Cárcamo devotes his second chapter to an analysis of Joaquín Lavín's *Chile: revolución silenciosa* (1987), which he classifies as "economic

⁶ For an analysis of the military's "salvationist" discourse, see chapter 1 of Stern (2004).

literature for the masses” (113).⁷ Lavín’s book, steeped in a messianic belief in free market logic, reads as a euphoric celebration of the nation as “market, merchandise, and brand,” a space imagined as a business whose citizens are primarily producers and consumers (114). Merging the languages of the economy and religious fundamentalism (Lavín is a self-proclaimed member of Opus Dei), *Chile: revolución silenciosa* resemanticizes certain historically dense concepts like “workers” and “revolutions,” divesting them of their previous meanings and rebellious potential. Instead of Allende’s “revolution,” the new “revolution” is the silent, yet steady progress of neoliberal economic change; instead of the popular subject as a protagonist of historical change, the popular subject for Lavín becomes an anonymous consumer or a cog in the wheel of capitalist production. Cárcamo also points out that Lavín’s discourse, in a double move, dangerously celebrates notions like “cultural hybridity” and “pluralism” while subordinating them to market logic. As other critics of neoliberalism have observed, the free market “absorbs differences,” neutralizing them and allowing them to exist only as long as they do not pose a threat to the system’s overall hegemony (135). If the discourse of the free market was founded in Chile with Friedman’s 1976 “sermon,” Lavín’s proselytizing book of the late 1980s continued the task, seeking definitively to consolidate neoliberal discourse in the public imagination, to permeate the Chilean psyche with “the ideas and languages of the free market” (117).

Cárcamo’s third and final chapter turns its attention away from economic discourse to the realm of literary fiction, specifically to the narrative of Alberto Fuguet, a writer of the self-titled “McOndo” generation. Unlike some critical readings that have discredited Fuguet’s literature as a mere phenomenon of the market, Cárcamo reveals the complexities of Fuguet’s poetics as a *mise en scène* and an interrogation of neoliberalism’s effects on society. Cárcamo focuses his critical eye on three of Fuguet’s books: the short story collection *Sobredosis* (1990) and the novels *Mala onda* (1991) and *Por favor, rebobinar* (1994). In all of these works, Fuguet

⁷ Joaquín Lavín (1953-) is a commercial engineer who was educated at the University of Chicago. He is a member of Unión Democrática Independiente (UDI), an ultra-conservative political party with close ties to Pinochet’s legacy. He ran for president in 1999 and 2005 and lost both elections. He is a predicted frontrunner for the presidency in 2010.

explores the effects of globalized (and particularly Americanized) pop culture on Chilean youths; disenchanted with the postdictatorial nation and lacking a clear path in life, Fuguet's protagonists wander aimlessly—and sometimes in a drugged stupor—through Santiago's shopping malls. In Fuguet's pastiche-like poetics, Chilean slang mixes with the brand names of American products and the languages of accounting, economics, and corporate finance, thus revealing a culture of the “copy” completely lacking in originality. Cárcamo uses the term “remix” to describe Fuguet's fictional recycling of signifiers and the globalized admixture of North and South in his texts. Unlike Chile's *criollista* narrators whose works (through the mid 1950s) were “grounded in a self-referential economy of the national and the popular,” Fuguet's narrative is completely *transnational* in terms of its form and content (187). A product of its times and its generation (that of the children of dictatorship), Fuguet's is a literature that is at once *of* and *about* the market.

Cárcamo's reading of Fuguet leaves the reader asking important questions: Is there room for originality (or dissidence) in literature today, or have writers and the whole literary enterprise been absorbed into the emplotments of the “free” market? Has the Chilean imagination become so saturated with market logic that other ways of being, of saying, and of doing politics are becoming (or already have become) lost? Indeed, Cárcamo's study convincingly shows that the market's logic is pervasive in Chile's public imagination, an idea which can be confirmed even by the most casual observation of Chile's current, internationally globalized, consumerist culture.

So, even with the pervasiveness of the market and its *tramas*, can spaces of resistance still exist? Cárcamo's answer seems to be “yes,” even if such spaces are becoming harder and harder to find. It is reassuring and significant that Cárcamo's book concludes with a reference to one of Chile's main indigenous groups, the *Mapuche-Pehuenche* nation from the Alto Bío-Bío region. If the Mapuche people were persecuted during the dictatorship, Cárcamo points out that they continue to be discriminated against under the Concertación governments. In 2004, with the tacit support of the Concertación, the Empresa Nacional de Electricidad S.A.

(ENDESA) constructed the Ralco Hydroelectric Plant on Mapuche-Pehuenche lands. Since then, the community has protested vehemently against the government and private sector's affronts to their autonomy and ancestral rights. Although, as Cárcamo notes, the Mapuche nation does not exist outside of the neoliberal system, it has managed to find ways of "interrogating and fissuring" the system from within in order to maintain a spirit of "localized critical difference" (251).

In addition to the Mapuche example, one might also mention the recent protests of the *pingüinos* during the Bachelet administration. Over the last few years, students ranging in age from primary school to college age have staged protests throughout Santiago and sit-ins in their schools to demand educational reform. Unhappy with the fact that Chile's educational system is still governed by the socially-stratified plan put into place by Pinochet, these students, who have occasionally faced reprehensible physical and psychological repression by the State, have not backed down from the fight. They, too, are proof that other longings and imaginings are possible despite neoliberal hegemony.

Tramas del mercado is an important book because it carefully deconstructs the intricate processes by which neoliberalism was marketed by power brokers and later naturalized in Chile's public imagination as an all-pervasive way of life. The book is a rich addition to the literature on postdictatorship in the Southern Cone and merits discussion by specialists, graduate students, and advanced undergraduates interested in issues of neoliberalism, dictatorships, globalization, memory, and democratization. If most of the writing on postdictatorship to date has focused on contestatory discursive practices that strive to challenge neoliberal hegemony, Cárcamo's study rightly cautions that such contestations, despite their necessary and decisive force, are also, in many ways, implicated in the emplotments of the very hegemony they seek to subvert.

Bibliography

- Avelar, Idelber. *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.
- Engel, Eduardo and Patricio Navia. *Que gane "el más mejor": mérito y competencia en el Chile de hoy*. Santiago: Random House Mondadori, 2006.
- Garretón, Manuel Antonio. *Del post-pinochetismo a la sociedad democrática: globalización y política en el bicentenario*. Santiago: Random House Mondadori, 2007.
- Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Masiello, Francine. *The Art of Transition: Latin American Culture and Neoliberal Crisis*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001.
- Montero, Cecilia. *La revolución empresarial chilena*. Santiago: Dolmen Ediciones, 1997.
- Moulián, Tomás. *Chile actual: anatomía de un mito*. Santiago: LOM/ARCIS, 1997.
- Richard, Nelly. *Residuos y metáforas (Ensayos de crítica cultural sobre el Chile de la Transición)*. Santiago: Cuarto Propio, 1998.
- Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Stern, Steve J. *Remembering Pinochet's Chile: On the Eve of London 1998*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.
- Thatcher, Margaret. *Statecraft: Strategies for a Changing World*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2003.