The Chilean Earthquake of 2010
Three Perspectives on One Disaster

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In 1755, Lisbon was shattered by a massive earthquake, three tsunamis, and dozens of raging fires. For the city's Jesuit leaders, destruction by earth, water, and fire was proof that God intended Lisbon's destruction and that prayer was the only path forward. Lisbon's secular leaders reasoned differently. As Prime Minister Sebastião de Melo, the future Marquis de Pombal, simply recommended: "Bury the dead and heal the living." The Lisbon earthquake, with its stark views of cause and effect, has defined the boundary between pre-modern and modern for many philosophers.[1]

Chile's February 27, 2010 earthquake, by all estimates, was stronger than the Lisbon *temblor*, measuring 8.8 on the Richter scale, although the physical destruction it caused has been more tempered. The latest estimates are that 521 people died in the quake, which destroyed or seriously damaged as many as 300,000 residential units. Authorities place total damage at US$30 billion, approximately 18 percent of Chile's GNP.[2] Still, like the Lisbon quake, a natural disaster of this enormity has led Chilean leaders to ponder larger questions as they consider what happened and how to move on. Not unlike Hurricane Katrina or the Haitian quake that struck six weeks earlier, the Chilean earthquake exposed a series of preexisting political and economic fault lines while also ramping up persistent anxieties, more so as it struck just two weeks before the first elected conservative president in fifty years was due to take office.

Examining the Chilean quake on the basis of press reports and a short trip to Chile in mid-April, I will evaluate the disaster through three distinct, if overlapping, sets of narratives. The first, emerging closest to the quake itself and largely generated by reports of looting, questioned what Chile "had become" and what (who?) was to blame for such appalling behavior. Within a few weeks, that discussion shifted to one centered on the challenges of reconstruction: not just how it would be financed and organized, but what kind of society would rise from the rubble. A final narrative, woven through each of the first two, was more existential and questioned how the disaster would impact Chile's quest to reach the status of a "developed" nation, to become, as it were, a "Portugal" (although that doesn't seem quite as attractive now as it was three months ago).

The Immediate Impact: A Dark Night of the Soul?

The earthquake, which jolted sleepers awake at 3:34 am, was centered on the coast between Concepción and Talca. While damage was considerable in Santiago, 200 miles to the north, cities closer to the epicenter were devastated, and entire coastal villages in the VII and VIII Regions were swallowed up by the trailing tsunami. Reporting on the physical damage caused by the quake—most often featuring images of a modern, fifteen-story apartment building in Concepción resting on its side like a pile of Legos knocked over by an angry three-year old—was soon replaced by stories of "widespread" looting. The U.S. press gave ample coverage to the dramatic plea of Concepción's *gremialista* mayor, Jacqueline van Rysselberghe, to Santiago: "Fear is everywhere. Armed men with pistols are attacking residential homes…Send the largest number of troops possible."[3]

There is considerable evidence that these reports, with video loops of the same stores being ransacked again and again, were exaggerated, but they provided an immensely troubling narrative for a political class uniformly horrified by the highly unflattering comparisons to Haiti they engendered.[4] For the ultra-conservative UDI senator, Jovino Novoa, the earthquake exposed the "dark part of the national soul," while Jorge Insunza, his ideological antonym, was moved, like a latter-day Sarmiento, to consider "what separates barbarism and civilization."[5] That both right and left in Santiago were quick to accept the worst about their fellow citizens speaks volumes about Chile's political leadership. Still, each had an explanation for such behavior. For Novoa, the fault lay in a twenty-year history (i.e., the span of center-left—*Concertación*—governments since Pinochet's departure) that "protected delinquents," stressed "rights at the expense of responsibilities," and led to a "deterioration" of the family and the "social decomposition" of Chile.[6] For Insunza, the looting was rooted in a forty-year history (i.e., Pinochet's dictatorship and the neoliberal economic model it cemented in place) that privileged the "exaltation of greed, and [the promotion] of individualism which has cultivated a cynical nihilism and the primacy of the law of the strongest over cooperation and solidarity."[7] In Chile the past is never far from the present.

Thus it was the past, beyond doubt, that influenced President Bachelet's highly unpopular decision to delay sending troops into Concepción.[8] True, Bachelet would leave office only days later with approval ratings to make President Obama, if not Kim Jong-il, weep with envy.[9] But even after two decades of civilian rule and the emergence of a post-Pinochet military, Bachelet, a Socialist, found it bitterly painful to return the military to the streets. The past is also present in how the earthquake affected Chileans. It is hardly original to observe that natural disasters pound the poor more than the rich: the Chilean earthquake, which was 500 times more powerful than the Haitian, resulted in almost 500 times fewer deaths than in the much poorer country.

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But the Chilean quake revealed the vulnerabilities of *both* poor *and* middle classes in a state that had been shaped by a "unanimous belief by right and left in [maintaining] the primacy of economic growth and free markets" over all else.[10]

The quake's impact on the poor could most easily be seen as one headed south from Santiago. Talca, the capital of the VII Region (Maule), a city of nearly 200,000 people, had been bypassed by Santiago's building boom. And so, when the quake hit, it turned the old city center, home to a largely poor population, to rubble.[11] Poor fishing villages like Dichato and Coliumo were pulverized by the tsunami. A week after the wave hit, houses still floated in the sea and a fishing boat rested in the forest, five kilometers from the water.[12]

Yet this was not a natural disaster that sought out only the poor; perhaps it was the first neoliberal earthquake. Many of the buildings that collapsed in Santiago were older structures, but among the most seriously damaged were twenty-three upscale apartment towers built after 1995.[13] There is mounting evidence that these buildings, projects of Chile's largest construction firms, suffered from flaws in architectural design, soil mechanics and construction materials. The municipalities charged with assuring compliance with building codes had long since been stripped of their regulatory oversight. As Francis Psenniger, an architect at the University of Chile, observed, "The only way the success of a project is measured is through its profitability," and corners were cut as engineering firms were hired to supervise their own work.[14] Marco Enríquez-Ominami, an unsuccessful leftist candidate in the recent presidential elections, argued that it only took one earthquake to reveal that Chile's "economic miracle stands on feet of clay."[15] But it seems unlikely that the quake will change Chile's deregulatory mania, particularly with Sebastián Piñera of the conservative *Coalición por el Cambio*, an entrepreneur with substantial ties to a number of construction firms, recently installed in the Moneda.[16]

The Middle-Term Outlook: What Kind of Reconstruction?

With the dead located and buried, and a new president installed, attention turned to reconstruction, specifically how the rebuilding would be financed, who would undertake the largest projects, and what would replace the rubble. The government estimates a public sector responsibility of US$8-10 billion in a total reconstruction bill of $30 billion.[17] To the surprise of supporters and detractors alike, Piñera's reconstruction financing plans include a 3 percent (temporary) rise in the income taxes paid by large corporations and a hike in the royalties paid by Chile's mining companies (voluntary, but hard to refuse), as well as a bond issue, the withdrawal of a modest amount from Chile's sovereign wealth fund, built up during years of strong copper prices, a higher tobacco tax, and the sale of two state-owned firms, including Aguas Andinas.[18] Enríquez-Ominami Twittered his quick approval; Senator Alejandro Navarro, who broke with the Socialist Party in 2008 to form the Movimiento Amplio Social, slyly called Piñera's first speech to Congress in which the plans were laid out, the "best speech of the *Concertación*."[19] But winning approval for the reconstruction package in the Senate (where Piñera's coalition is a minority) and the lower house (where he has to rely on three members of a small centrist party), could prove challenging.

While debate continues on specific aspects of the President's plan—the *Concertación* wants to make corporate tax hikes permanent—the reconstruction proposal provides a way to divine Piñera's long term goals. In the first place, while it should be no surprise to any who have followed his career, Piñera has long been more pragmatist than *gremialista* ideologue. He supported corporate tax hikes in 1990 and 2001, and his decision to throw a tax rise into the mix is both a deliberate challenge to his UDI partners, already marginalized in his cabinet, and an indication of his likely desire to fashion a stable centrist coalition.[20]

Secondly, while the debate over the macroeconomic implications of reconstruction continues in Congress, actions on the ground move forward quickly. To see this, we return to Talca. Nearly two months after the quake, more than 2,500 families remained homeless, more than 90 percent from the old city center. The vacuum left by the destruction of their homes has been filled by dozens of real estate agents, investors, and builders, all looking to construct a modern city center in Talca—and offering home owners less than half of what their property is worth. Many, with no other resources, are accepting.[21] One can already see the consequences of the reconstruction that is taking place: in the move to "modernize" the post-quake environment, the poor are absorbing the greatest costs, both directly in the affected areas and nationally, to the extent that public investment in social services will be negatively impacted by a shift into private sector construction projects.[22]

Finally, Piñera's reconstruction plans have not only reopened ideological fault lines between his *Renovación Nacional* (RN) party and *gremialismo* (UDI), but between the largest Chilean corporations, where his own roots—and investments—lie, and the "pymes" (*pequeñas y medianas empresas*). Although the president, in his May 21

address to Congress, spoke of his respect for the role of small and medium-sized enterprise in Chile, his first reconstruction project ("Manos a la Obra") transferred $15 million to 239 municipal governments, allowing them to buy construction materials, but only from one of the country's three largest hardware firms.[23]

The Long-Run: To Be Developed

Much fun was made of Chile's contribution to the 1992 Seville world's fair: an iceberg towed across the Atlantic. While the gesture was intended to mobilize a piece of nature to launch a narrative about Chilean progress, it inevitably produced competing narratives. So it is with Chile's 2010 earthquake: an act of nature has produced different perspectives on Chile's future. While it is unlikely that the February disaster will alter the fundamental economic agreements that have governed Chile for thirty-five years, the earthquake did illuminate a central anxiety shared by much of the elite political class: what will this do to Chile's quest to be "developed," a goal that will be met, Piñera reassures, by 2018. Chilean elites have dreamed of joining the ranks of the "developed" for decades, if not centuries. For those who inhabit Santiago's trendy neighborhoods and frequent its posh restaurants, what that dream implies has already been achieved. And yet they worry that it could all disappear in the blink of an eye. As UDI Senator Víctor Pérez put it, "in one minute 45 seconds, we went back decades in infrastructure and advancements…"[24] Maybe that anxiety comes wrapped in the DNA of those who live in a country with an unforgiving history of earthquakes. Or perhaps, since in Chile the past is never far from the present, the anxiety is linked to a different history, one in which the high-rise dreams of the elites almost tumbled into the hands of the poor.

What is certain is that for those left with nothing but a pile of rubble in Talca, the question to be posed to Senator Pérez is: what do you mean "we"?

Endnotes

1 See Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Modern Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 2002.

2 <www.elmostrador.cl>, May 15, 2010, and Fernando Gualdoni, "No hay razón para que la región no pueda derrotar al subdesarrollo," *El País* [Madrid], May 18, 2010.

3 Jonathan Franklin, "Chile Struggles to Contain Chaos," *Washington Post*, March 2, 2010. *Gremialismo* refers to the aggressively conservative movement based on professional and business organizations which organized in opposition to Salvador Allende's government, provided Pinochet's ideological orientation, and institutionalized as the Unión Democrático Independiente (UDI), one of the two largest conservative parties, with the return to civilian rule in 1990. It was part of the conservative coalition headed by Sebastián Piñera that won election earlier this year.

4 Benjamin Witte and Sara Miller Llana, "Chile Earthquake: 'Looters Run Wild'? Not Quite," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 1, 2010.

5 Jovino Novoa, "Lado oscuro del alma nacional," and Jorge Insunza, "Barbarie y civilización," both in *El Mercurio*, March 7, 2010.

6 Novoa, "Lado oscuro."

7 Insunza, "Barbarie."

8 "Gobierno reprueba por actuación frente al terremoto," *El Mercurio*, March 7, 2010.

9 More than 84 percent of those polled voiced a positive opinion of Bachelet's government <www.elmostrador.cl>, March 14, 2010 ["El 73% de chilenos cree que Piñera lo hará igual o mejor que Bachelet."]

10 Editorial <www.elmostrador.cl>, May 5, 2010.

11 <http://ciperchile.cl>, April 27, 2010.

12 <http://ciperchile.cl>, March 5, 2010.

13 <http://ciperchile.cl>, March 15, 2010.

14 Pascale Bonnefoy, "Why Were Chile's Newest Buildings Prone to Destruction?" <globalpost.com/dispatch/chile/100315/building-codes-earthquake>, March 17, 2010.

15 *El Mercurio*, April 10, 2010, A2.

16 <http://ciperchile.cl>, March 18, 2010.

17 *El Mercurio*, April 9, 2010, B2.

18 *La Nación*, April 17, 2010, 4.

19 <http://elmostrador.cl>, May 21, 2010.

20 For more on the president, see Manuel Salazar, *Sebastián Piñera* (Santiago: Momentum), 2009.

21 "Nuevo terremoto en Talca" <http://ciperchile.cl>, April 27, 2010.

22 "Chile's Reconstruction after Earthquake Will Slow Economic Recovery," Euromonitor Global Market Research Blog, April 14, 2010 <http://blog.euromonitor.com/2010/04/chiles-reconstruction-after-earthquake-will-slow-economic-recovery.html>.

23 Pascale Bonnefoy, "Who Is Profiting from Rebuilding Chile?" globalpost.com, April 14, 2010 <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/chile/100412/earthquake-reconstruction-pinera>.

24 "UDI respalda plan para financiar la reconstrucción del país" <http://www.elmostrador.cl>, March 13, 2010. ■