Earthquake in Chile
Poverty and Social Diagnoses

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Chile's February 27 earthquake occurred in the midst of an historical turning point in the country's politics. In eleven days, President Michelle Bachelet of the Concertación—the coalition of center-left parties that had governed the country since the end of the dictatorship—would leave office and the millionaire businessman, Sebastián Piñera, would become the country's first democratically elected right-wing president in fifty years. The earthquake not only marked this political transition in the present and established material conditions that have shaped and will continue to shape the incoming president's tenure, but also, in the wake of institutional failures, it inspired diagnoses of present politics and society, shadowed by specific regions of the past.

In the first twenty-four hours, a complex situation emerged as Chile asserted its sovereignty in the face of the national disaster, delaying the acceptance of immediate offers of international aid. Without state backup systems, however, the provinces had effectively no communication with the capital, and the range and depth of devastation was both underestimated and, to a large extent, unknowable. In the midst of a confused state response, populations in the most affected areas of Concepción and El Maule experienced intensifying insecurity and desperation, and after forty-eight hours, scared, anguished, panic-stricken—and also angry—men and women broke into the supermarkets. Taken up and amplified by the media, such scenes of *los saqueos* projected a sense of social chaos.

In this commentary, I explore how images of "the poor" were projected in mainstream media and critical commentaries to diagnose the state of society. How were phrases such as "public order," "social loyalty," and "unrestrained consumerism" cast in relation to the poor? What ideas of subjectivity and sociality underlay these social diagnoses?

"Social Earthquake"

As desperation grew on the second day of the earthquake, news of looting and pillaging was transmitted live across the country. A Televisión Nacional reporter interviewing men and women carrying packs of milk, bottled water, and foodstuffs, framed the question to them this way: "Is this robbery, is this vandalism, or is this necessity?" Seeing a group of youth carry off a refrigerator, this reporter exclaimed to them, "This is robbery! Did you know that?" Over television and Internet, video clips of men and women pushing up cargo loading doors of the large supermarket chains such as Líder in Concepción were shown as the moving image backdrop for updates on the unfolding crisis. These clips were posted on the daily newspaper *La Tercera's* website under the heading, "With neither God nor law." In their repetition, the images generated an affective force, propelling judgment from state officials and media commentators. President Bachelet remarked, "Chile is indignant with the looters who seek to profit off the pain of the people" and that they would be subject to "all the rigor of the law."

For several scholars, social critics, and social organizations, the looting demonstrated not only immediate institutional failures, but also failures of the model of development that has been followed, with important variations, since 1973 (Garcés, 2010; Brozvic et al, 2010; see also Winn, 2004; Ffrench-Davis and Stallings, 2001; Drake and Jaksic, 1999). This model has emphasized "decentralization" not in terms of resources, but rather in terms of local and individual responsibility, leaving provinces, families and individuals largely responsible for themselves. Recently constructed apartment buildings collapsed due to lack of regulation. Fissured roads and collapsed bridges provided further evidence of the state's role as a broker between basic infrastructural development and private companies seeking contracts with little or no state oversight.

Such a picture of this state-market failure reverses and complicates the discussion of "disaster capitalism" and the ongoing emergency in post-Katrina New Orleans (see Adams et al., 2009; see also Klein, 2005). In the post-Katrina context, "The 'state' was erased as a functioning buffer for the poorest sectors of the socioeconomic hierarchy, and in its place a "free market" in private-sector development contracts emerged" (Adams, et al., 2009: 630). In Chile, the state is not posed against the "free market" or replaced by it; rather state and market "extend" each other. The state, through its active deregulation of building codes, work contracts, pensions and insurance, extends the market, while the market, through its securing of local development contracts, and partnership in social programs, extends the state.

For the poor and working class this synergistic extension has created local ecologies of poverty that depend upon the particular way in which state and market are hooked into each other at the municipal level, through social and health policies, employment, and local development schemes. Such local ecologies bear the institutional traces of Pinochet era reforms. While the post-dictatorship state has dramatically increased social spending, the frameworks within which social policies are actualized have important continuities with those established during the Pinochet regime. Decentralized social programs are targeted to those qualifying as "extremely poor." At the same time, the state has engaged in an

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active deregulation of labor conditions, generating extreme precariousness for those qualifying as "extremely poor" and those who are simply "poor."

For other social critics and public intellectuals, the looting affectively expressed the kind of society established and elaborated since the 1973 *golpe*, the "social earthquake." Thus, the economic system has produced a "lack of social cohesion" as well as a culture of consumption and individualism, in which the protection of private property is valued above all else (see Dammert, 2010).

For example, Professor of Labor Law José Luis Ugarte, asks "….. *por qué nuestros pobres se transformaron tan rápido en nuestros bárbaros… ¿por qué en Chile apenas el orden se retira—cuando el brazo armado de la ley deja de atemorizar—los sectores pobres se sienten con el legítimo derecho de saquear y tomar aquello que de otro modo, los legales, no alcanzan? ¿Por qué tan poca lealtad con la sociedad… En sociedades altamente desiguales, en cambio, la cohesión y la lealtad social escasean y son sustituidas por la fuerza y el miedo—la mano dura como gusta decir tanto chileno*." (Ugarte, 2010). For historian Gabriel Salazar, "profound frustration" and "*malestar interior*" is structurally produced through precarious labor, the consequent inability to form stable families, and lack of avenues for political expression: "*Todo esto explica que existe en Chile una masa social marginal que no puede consumir, vive en pobreza absoluta, que tiene frustraciones profundas y una potente inclinación a la delincuencia. Por eso, cualquier evento público tiende a terminar en vandalismo público*" (Salazar in *El Ciudadano*, April 29, 2010).

While such analyses point out underlying structural violence, I am concerned with the way in which the poor seem to become transformed into a homogeneous mass in these commentaries—"our barbarians" or "the marginal social mass"—which exemplifies the effects of frustration and resentment of *society*, in which society is taken as a unified body that demands "social loyalty." Yet, the specific ways in which the state and market extend each other have created particular local ecologies of poverty, that, in addition, are informed by their own local histories. How then can social analysis consider "communities of *ressentiment*" without losing their particularity, without transforming the poor into the mass, the dark side of the, perhaps transcendent, unity that is revealed in moments of crisis?

Densities of the Local: A Perspective

Perhaps such analysis requires a shift in perspective from commentary over an assumed society to the densities of the local, particularly amongst "the poor." In my longitudinal work in La Pincoya, a *población* in the Northern Zone of Santiago, I have explored how neighborhood relations and complex family formations elaborate notions of reciprocity as well as tacit acknowledgements to secure an everyday characterized by extremely precarious labor and high levels of household debt. Such relations transfigure both the state's attempt to pay the "social debt" of dictatorship to the poor through a variety of interventions on health and poverty as well as market mechanisms such as institutional credit and debt that have grown dramatically during the 1990s (Han, n-d). Over nine years, I have also been able to chart the small actions through which an everyday life is secured and made vulnerable among families and neighbors, in relation to each other, and also in relation to the state. It was upon this complex and dynamic ground that the earthquake occurred.

Let me chart the ensuing days of the earthquake in La Pincoya. I finally reached P by phone on the morning of February 28. In her mid-40s, over the past five years P has slowly entered into local social organizing, becoming *Presidenta de la Junta de Vecinos* and, along with her partner, and neighbors, organized a public protest against the expropriation of houses within the Municipality of Huechuraba. The earthquake had hit at the end of the month. For families in La Pincoya, the timing of the earthquake meant that either that they had not yet been paid or had just received their end-of-month pay. As P described to me, those who had received their end-of-month pay had spent much of that income towards buying bottled water for neighbors, family, and for themselves. The price of bread in some local stores had tripled or quadrupled over the weekend, and in the first twenty-four hours of the earthquake, all of the bottled water and soda in local corner stores had been sold. In the face of this momentary scarcity, P, her extended family, and neighbors on her street encouraged the children to consolidate all existing water into full bottles that could then be divided amongst them. Older children and adults began hauling water out of the canal to use for the toilets.

By Sunday afternoon, February 28, residents of La Pincoya still did not have water or electricity in their sector, even as neighboring wealthier sectors within the same municipality had their water and electricity restored. As scenes of looting continued to be amplified through the mainstream media, rumors of marauding La Pincoya gangs gained traction in a Twitter feed on Huechuraba: "Turbas de La Pincoya vienen a saquear casas en Pedro Fontova." *La Tercera* ran an article on March 2 detailing how these communities had formed "comités de vigilancia en cada microbarrio y con palos para repeler un posible ataque" and

ending with the general of the Carabineros remarking that the police had received a series of false demands, waving off the rumors of public disturbance (Mendoza, 2010).

While fear and insecurity circulated amongst these wealthier sectors, a different sense of desperate insecurity mixed with local defiance grew within La Pincoya. Still waiting for water, and only able to get news from a few battery-powered radios, P related to me on the afternoon of March 1st that she walked down to the municipal offices to demand that water be trucked into the *población*. A water truck indeed arrived later that evening, accompanied by a few fistfights among neighbors spurred by those trying to jump the line. Nevertheless, the water truck was empty before it reached P's block. P asked the driver when he would come back, and the driver responded that he was not sure. His next responsibility was "to water the trees in Pedro Fontova." When describing the scene to me, P hesitated, saying that it hurt her to recount "such ugly little things," both the behavior of her neighbors and the truck driver's response. "I said to the driver, 'are you telling me that we are worth less than a plant?'" Such instances of insult and disappointment, paired together with receiving needed aid, form a complex of affects, stitching resentment, rage, impotence, and defiance together—forming one of many grounds upon which everyday life must flourish.

Other grounds include the small acts of sharing and caring that would not necessarily be called "solidarity" in ordinary language, seen in neighbors putting their kiddy pools into the middle of the street for the water truck, to fill for the whole block. "It was faster than filling individual bottles, and we could get more water to everyone that way," P told me.

While the earthquake could be seen as an extraordinary event that highlights the social inequalities and poverty lived by the majority of the Chilean population, illuminating the society's dark underbelly embodied in the "frustration" of the poor, a perspective from the local shows how this event is tethered into the everyday through multiple affective grounds, complicating any unified notion of the poor and the affects that "they" may express.

Solidarity and Individualism

In his essay, "Sociedad y política en el Chile del terremoto," sociologist Manuel Garretón compares "the distance between two epochs" from the 1960 earthquake that hit Valdivia and this year's earthquake, in terms of a certain loss or displacement of politics that has occurred as a result of the socio-economic model. Whereas fifty years earlier "*El país tuvo que enfrentar la gran tarea de reconstrucción y eso se proyectaría más adelante en los grandes proyectos de transformación social con convocatoria nacional, que vendrían del centro y la izquierda*," today's society is characterized by "*la idea de país de oportunidades individuales, de sociedad como el ámbito de realización personal a lo que todo el resto queda subordinado... La política ha sido desplazada en su dimensión principal de construcción de una sociedad mejor*" (Garretón, 2010). Likewise, writer Ariel Dorfman compares the social values underlying responses to both earthquakes, as "*una lección en solidaridad*" in contrast with a society "*más egocéntrica e individualista donde, en vez de una visión de justicia social para todos, la ciudadanía se dedica en su mayoría, a consumir en forma desenfrenada, lo que acarrea, por lo demás, un estrés y deterioro psíquico considerable en la población*" (Dorfman, 2010).

Such contrasts raise the question of how culture is inherited from one generation to the next and how a culture can evolve. Is culture to be understood as a set of rules that one follows blindly, as moral values that we come to embody? Or, is another picture of culture possible, as anthropologist Veena Das discussing Wittgenstein remarks, "To have a future in language, the child should have been enabled to say 'and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires'" (Das, 1998: 171).

Such a picture of culture, as one that can evolve and produce "newness" with the expression of desires, carries important methodological commitments that could inform a re-thinking of contemporary subjectivity in Chile, as well as our criteria for "the political." What senses of belonging would emerge if we displaced such bipolar abstractions of past solidarity and present individualism, if we were to shift perspective to the everyday, to a different temporal horizon in which small acts matter as much as "grand projects in social transformation"? While acknowledging the disappointment embedded within such contrasts, we might find that a turn to the everyday offers other viable social ties that ordinary people are sustaining and slowly stitching into a different kind of political and moral ground, in the midst and in the aftermath of the earthquake.

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