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Bread, justice, and liberty: grassroots activism and human rights in Pinochet's Chile

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BOOK REVIEW

Bread, justice, and liberty: grassroots activism and human rights in Pinochet's Chile, by Alison Bruey, Madison, WI, University of Wisconsin Press, 2018, 312 pp., US\$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-299-31610-5

Alison J. Bruey's *Bread, Justice, and Liberty* is a cogent, insightful, and elegantly written study of grassroots activism during the Pinochet dictatorship from the perspective of Santiago's *poblaciones*. Loosely translated as shantytowns, *poblaciones* and their inhabitants (*pobladores*) formed a central part of twentieth-century popular rebellion in Chile. Bruey argues that *pobladores* drew upon that history, specifically the often-overlooked cooperation between the secular Leftist and Catholic traditions, to engage in the *trabajo de hormiga* (ant's work) of opposing the dictatorship and supporting their communities. Using an impressive breadth of original and archival oral history testimonies from three "generational cohorts" gathered over four years of field work, *Bread, Justice, and Liberty* demonstrates that such ant's work was key to the emergence of broader protests that shook Chile and garnered international attention in the 1980s. Bruey challenges many traditional periodizations of dictatorship and post-dictatorship Chile, arguing, for example, that the infrastructure that allowed for the success of 1983 protests began much earlier within *poblaciones* and that much of Pinochet's violent neoliberal logic – most vociferously aimed at *pobladores* – extended far beyond the 1989–1990 transition to democracy.

Bread, Justice, and Liberty is divided into six chapters bracketed by an introduction and epilog. Chapters 1 and 2 give important background about the two *poblaciones* on which the author's study relies, Villa Francia and La Legua, before and during Pinochet's military coup, respectively. Chapter 1 shows how the very existence of these *poblaciones* depended upon the cooperation of popular sector organizations, the secular Left, and the liberationist Catholic Church to help residents seize land upon which to settle and construct communities, helping to create a "broader movement for survival, resistance, and change" under the dictatorship (p. 37). Chapter 2 examines the coup from the perspective of the *poblaciones* before analyzing the narratives that *pobladores* constructed about the coup in the early 2000s. It finds that the memories of *pobladores* have been buried and excluded from the process of memory-building in post-transition Chile.

Bruey beautifully details the political histories of La Legua and Villa Francia in these early chapters. However, I was left wondering how these two sites were selected. She explains in the introduction that, "[despite] their despite their differences, both La Legua and Villa Francia became known as politically combative *poblaciones* whose reputations survive into the present" (p. 14). One can assume that Bruey's interest in the exclusion of *pobladores* in the nation's historic memory of the dictatorship informed her selection, but a broader discussion of methodology and site selection might enhance readers' confidence in her use of evidence.

Chapters 3 and 4 deal with the 1973–1978 era, a period of massive repression, particularly for *pobladores*, who suffered the most egregious economic and social human rights violations at the hands of the Pinochet regime's military and secret police, but also due to the economic stagnation and employment precarity wrought by neoliberal restructuring. Chapter 3 looks particularly at the regime's destruction of the collective culture of *poblaciones* through physical violence, which encouraged *pobladores* to impose a "bloody

veil” of self-policing and neoliberal restructuring, which destroyed *pobladores*’ “social commons”, or spaces of community building. Despite the immense repression, Chapter 4 shows how *pobladores* formed webs of early political resistance, human rights organizing, and mutual aid.

Chapter 5 examines the tumultuous years of 1978–1982, as the Left underwent a period of both “agitation and strategic reorientation” (p. 134). *Pobladores* describe this period as the “fin de reflujó” (end of retreat), which marked the transformation of the opposition’s position in relation to the dictatorship, from defensive to offensive.

Bread, Justice, and Liberty’s greatest (though not its only) contribution is in its centering of *pobladores* within the history of Chile’s transition to democracy. Bruey successfully challenges the dominant narrative promoted by Chile’s political elites – both Concertationistas and Pinochetistas – that misrepresents the country’s transition to democracy as a “peaceful” and essentially bourgeois democratic one. Bruey’s work finds that the political violence of the mid-to late 1980s that came largely out of the *poblaciones*, as part of a larger repertoire of accepted tactics, encouraged the Pinochet regime to work with Centrist opposition. Chapter 6 illuminates the ways that Pinochet’s regime intentionally divided opposition based not only on political tendencies (Centrist versus more radical opposition) but also based upon class. The Junta successfully alienated middle-class opposition from that of *pobladores* by painting the latter as “terrorists”, “anti-socials”, and “delinquents”. Such abjection encouraged “downward moral displacement” or the increased social isolation and criminalization of *pobladores*. Far from remaining a relic of the Pinochet era, the political and media elites of the Center-Left perpetuated such stereotypes of *pobladores*, thereby ignoring the human rights abuses inherent in neoliberalism, during Chile’s transition to democracy and well into the twenty-first century.

Bread, Justice, and Liberty is not a transnational history, but its lessons undoubtedly transcend Pinochet’s Chile. It is essential reading for those at nearly every academic level, including advanced undergraduate students, who are interested in solidarity networks, memory, human rights, repression/resistance, and neoliberalism.

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