

Review Essay: Unresolved Memories of Chile

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Steve J. Stern. *Remembering Pinochet's Chile: On the Eve of London, 1998*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004. 247pp. \$29.95 (cloth).

Peter Winn, ed. *Victims of the Chilean Miracle: Workers and Neoliberalism in the Pinochet Era, 1973-2002*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004. 423pp. \$24.29 (paper).

The 1973 military overthrow of Chilean president Salvador Allende Gossens, on that “other” September 11, is one of those events with scholarly staying power. Maybe because it occurred in Chile where conspiring men in uniform were antithetical to the nation’s civilian, constitutionalist tradition, or maybe because of the sheer pathos aroused by the scene of air force planes bombing the presidential palace to roust an armed Allende vowing defend his government to the end, or maybe because of the ensuing military repression, the mass arrests, the imprisonments in remote locations, the torture as policy, the thousands of “disappeared,” the forced exiles—whatever the reason, shelves-full of histories, memoirs, novels, and documentaries have appeared to describe and analyze, defend and condemn the unimaginable occurrences of 1973 and their intense aftermath. From the start, most of those works immediately accepted the episode as a watershed in Chilean history. More than thirty years later, despite that the sixteen-year regime of Army General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte had been long replaced by renewed constitutionally-elected civilian government, most studies with modern Chile as subject still find the historical roots of their myriad topics in the *golpe* against Allende and the resulting military rule of Pinochet. Two recent examples of the continuing scholarly interest are Steve J. Stern’s *Remembering Pinochet’s Chile* and *Victims of the Chilean Miracle*, edited by Peter Winn. Both published in 2004, the two adopt 1973 as the starting point and trace their topics forward, well past the return to civilian government in 1988–89. Neither, however, ascribes to that historic transition a significance equal to the earlier events. For both, the legacy of Allende’s demise and Pinochet’s dictatorship continues in almost seamless fashion to the present.

For Stern, the topic is the post-Pinochet struggle within Chile over the creation of an “emblematic memory,” that is, how will the origins, violence and legacy of the military government be remembered in the collective mind of the nation? Contending for broad acceptance are four heretofore “loose” memories, each of which Stern introduced

through a representational story of an individual Chilean interviewee. A matron of the elite remembered the overthrow as “the happiest day of my life,” thus Pinochet as a hero who saved the nation from the upheaval and impending civil war of the Allende years. A 66-year old mother experienced lasting remembrance of the same events as “rupture...an open wound, an awful hurt that fails to heal” (p. 42) after two of her sons were arrested, tortured and disappeared in 1974. In the memory of one dissident, these were years of quietly persevering under similar persecution until awakening to, and participating in, new movements for the revival of civic culture. Finally, there was the Army colonel, who passionately declared himself indifferent to the entire issue of human rights and violence, as were, he was convinced, most Chileans, soldiers and civilians alike. By 1998, Stern concludes, as Pinochet was about to be arrested in London and held pending a ruling by British courts on an extradition order from Spain, the Chilean struggle had reached a “memory impasse,” the struggle unresolved amid a swirl of contending emotions in the present and agendas for the future.

Remembering Pinochet, the introductory volume to Stern’s trilogy on the topic, is meticulously researched, creatively organized, and engagingly written. Although the subject, public memory, is a highly abstract one, the human is never far removed from his discussion, not only in the case studies that he employs, but also in the Afterwords that follow each chapter, in which another human story—like the conscripted soldier whose nightmarish experience remained shrouded in official silence—lends nuance to a central point. Then there is the author’s appreciated determination to put a Chilean face on this adventure into the burgeoning historiographical field of the history of memory through invented terms, like “policide” (the murder of a way of doing politics and government) and “memory knots” (individuals and groups who relentlessly work against society’s fears and inertia to form collective memory out of loose, individual ones). Most refreshing of all is Stern’s candid admission of his own anti-Pinochet bias, an attitude proceeding from his personal leftward leanings, the familial influence of his *chilena* spouse, Florencia E. Mallon, a Latin Americanist scholar in her own right, and his heritage as a second generation Holocaust survivor.

Peter Winn’s collection of essays, *Victims of the Chilean Miracle*, likewise views the same historical period, 1973–98 (with 1999–2002 seen as “epilogue”) as an integral era, also despite the celebrated change of political direction with the election of Patricio Aylwin, candidate of

the Center-Left coalition *Concertación* in 1989. Here the subject is organized labor in Chile as it flourished under Allende, suffered under Pinochet and was relatively neglected under the new democrats. After an introductory essay on “The Pinochet Era” by the editor, various contributors describe organized labor in general during the period (Volker Frank), followed by the status of workers in specific industries: textiles (Winn), copper manufacturing (Joel Stillerman), copper mining (Thomas Miller Klubock), agriculture (Heidi Tinsman), fisheries (Rachel Schurman), and the forestry sector (Klubock). In each enterprise, the fate of the worker is the same. Under military rule, there was outright repression of leading militants, massive cuts in wages and benefits, and the wholesale loss of the right to organize, collectively bargain and strike, losses codified and institutionalized in the *Plan Laboral* of 1979. Just as damaging to workers’ interests, the authors collectively argue, has been the failure of reinstalled civilian administrations to champion a living wage and restored rights for Chile’s working class. Neither Aylwin (1990–94), nor Eduardo Frei Ruiz-Tagle (1994–2000), not even the Socialist Ricardo Lagos, elected in 2000, have sought to alter much the neoliberal economic policies adopted under Pinochet, policies and programs for which Chilean workers have paid—and continue to pay—an enormous financial and social cost. Whatever the real truth of the “Chilean Miracle,” the book concludes, the nation’s working men and women have only been victims of it.

As with any published collection of essays, some contributions stand out more than others. In this case, Stillerman’s clearly written discussion of copper miners fascinates for its depiction of the decline of Chile’s historically most privileged and politically powerful labor group. Heidi Tinsman’s contribution is noteworthy for her contention that

women workers in the new for-export agricultural industries made significant social gains, despite exploitation by employers. And Thomas Klubock impressively details the ecological damage to national forests that accompanied the “boom” in Chilean lumber and wood products. In the end, however, the collection suffers from its repetitiveness and its predictability. Although more cohesive than normally are others of this format, *Victims of the Chilean Miracle* contains little that is new, other than detail, beyond its introductory chapters. It is the same story told six times. Nor is the message in any way subtle or nuanced. If the tome intended to explore the question: “Are they [Chilean workers] victims of Chile’s neoliberal ‘miracle’?” (p. 2), the answer was provided in the affirmative by the title. Indeed, the volume seems so intent on promoting its message that its credibility begins to suffer from lack of context. As with so many earlier works on this controversial episode, the more determined the desire to condemn Pinochet, the more favorable becomes the judgment of Allende, whose administration is here hailed as the “apex of democracy in Chile” (p. 19), the deteriorating economy, social fabric, and political traditions virtually dismissed.

Two new additions to the already voluminous library of works on the fall of Allende and the rule of Pinochet, both recognize the watershed that was 1973 and its aftermath for Chilean history. One, however, contributes but yet another voice to an aging debate about the merits of the Socialist and the sins of the General. The other breaks new ground in its insights about a Chilean present that is looking back in order to map its future. Both books come from recognized authorities in the field, are clear in their exposition and comprehensive in their documentation. But if there is time and energy to read only one, choose Stern.