

Book Review: *The Cry of the Renegade*

Raymond B. Craib, *The Cry of the Renegade. Politics and Poetry in Interwar Chile* (Oxford University Press, 2016)

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Craib narrates to us skilfully a story that certainly deserves to be told: a history of repression and resistance, of savagery and hope, built by a radical coalition of workers and students in the late part of the 1910s and 1920 in Santiago de Chile. Although this is a book about a particular time and place populated by people who make sense in this very specific context, it has much to teach radicals today facing similar challenges.

“*The Cry of the Renegade*” is one of the latest contributions in critical academia to the rich history of anarchism in Latin America, a movement which, far from confined to history books, it is still very much alive. Although much of these studies –whereas on anarchism on radical labour– are centred on the transnational dimensions and interactions of these movements, Raymond B., Craib brings back the attention to their localised, contextualised and embedded nature. In this sense, he follows the path of other great contextualised histories of local anarchist movements, with Bruce Nelson’s “*Beyond the Martyrs*” for transnational anarchists in Chicago, Tom Goyens’ “*Beer and Revolution*” for German anarchists in New York, and Chris Ealham “*Anarchism and the City*” for anarchists in Barcelona, among others. He narrates to us skilfully a story that certainly deserves to be told: a history of repression and resistance, of savagery and hope, built by a radical coalition of workers and students in the late part of the 1910s and 1920 in Santiago de Chile. Page after page, we are told the story of this movement through specific characters, articulated around specific places and their contexts. Casimiro Barrios is the character that allows us to understand how racism and deportations was used to counter radicalism. The Gandulfo brothers, Juan and Pedro, are used to gain an insight into the students’ movement of the time and its complex but fruitful relations and interactions with the workers movement. José Domingo Gómez Rojas, helps us to explore questions around the radical cultural movement and the fate of the many victims of repression (the book starts and finishes with his funeral in late 1920). And José Astorquiza helps us to understand the logic of the ruling class behind the repression and the savagery of the State.

Santiago de Chile was a city where a much radicalised working class existed, drawing behind it other social sectors disaffected with the *status quo*. Latin America, although it didn’t suffer

directly from the calamities of the Great War (1914–1919), it suffered from the economic consequences of it, as most countries, which depended heavily on European markets, entered a period of recession in the aftermath of the conflagration. Chile, after the annexation of nitrate-rich territories belonging to both Bolivia and Peru in the War of the Pacific (1879–1883), experienced sustained growth for decades thanks to the nitrate bonanza. Although there was a boom in the demand of nitrate at the start of the Great War, after the synthetic version was invented, Chile entered into a steady economic decline which would dominate the country for the best part of two decades. In this context, signalled by a generalised lack of rights, and frightful misery coupled with hunger, unrest grew steadily. Organised workers had some decades of organisation in resistance societies and class oriented unions, leading to the creation of the Chilean branch of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in 1919 –which would become the *bête noire* of the Chilean plutocrats. Together with a very defiant students’ movement articulated around the Chilean Federation of Students (FECH), which reflected the discontent among the growing middle classes, they merged forces in order to challenge the conservative establishment.

This was a “capacious left”, as described by Craib, which combined radicalised elements with those who favoured the more traditional and legalistic methods of struggle, all united in a utopian view of a world of free and equal beings. A capacious left which debated their ideas in clubs, radical cafes and union or students’ halls, that voiced their views through a vigorous press and who joined forces in meetings, demonstrations and broad organisations to fight an unjust social order. This alliance of workers and students, in spite of its feet being firmly rooted in the streets of Santiago, followed global events with avid interest, particularly the Russian Revolution -an episode which sent shockwaves throughout the world. In Chile, this fateful event stimulated hope for the radicalised elements and instilled physical fear in the hearts of the aristocratic bourgeoisie. The response of the regime to this challenge was swift and brutal. This response was disguised in 1920 with growing militaristic jingoism and military mobilisation for an artificial conflict with Peru –the so-called “War of Don Ladislao”, a reference to the then Minister of War. The repression wave saw the subservient media calling “subversives”, as “Peruvian agents” in Chile. It is on the impact of this State savagery on the actual lives of people, the main topic Craib deals with in his book.

One of the reasons why this (hi)story deserves to be told, is because it speaks to contemporary concerns. In particular, this is a book about the toxic mixture of patriotism and militarism, xenophobia, the ugly spectre of the far-right, about repression and class violence. But this is also the (hi)story of the various ways in which people, more or less successfully –notwithstanding the dear human cost they were made to pay- resisted this onslaught, organised, fought, defended and expanded rights. Resistance was fruitful, indeed.

The repression of the State combined legal, paralegal and brazenly illegal methods. Laws, on the one hand, started to get increasingly repressive and the scientific method was put to use for increasing mechanisms of surveillance and control, in Chile and elsewhere. When these laws were deemed insufficient to control the “subversive” elements, the State didn’t hesitate to resort to illegal detentions, arbitrary incarcerations and torture. Working class people were being kidnapped without warrant by detectives and by members of a notoriously corrupt police force, on non-existent crimes such as instigating strikes, or accused of being Peruvian spies. Political prisoners would be held for months without trial, in solitary confinement, without food for protracted periods of time, manacled in heavy shackles for weeks, subject to torture, dwelling in morbid conditions, denied fresh air and sun. In these conditions, the young poet, anarchist, Christian,

wobbly (member of the Chilean branch of the IWW) and radical, José Domingo Gómez Rojas, lost sanity and then died in Santiago's psychiatric hospital on September 1920. This hideous crime caused a wave of outrage and protest which, eventually, meant the first crack into the conservative edifice of Chilean institutions. A new generation of Chilean radicals, which included Salvador Allende, the first Marxist to ever come to power through a democratic vote in 1970, were inspired by many of the protagonists of this resistance.

However, the cost paid by the anarchist movement was frightfully high. The ruling elite called subversives and anarchists agents of chaos, but, as Craib notes, despite "*the repeated efforts by many to criminalize oppositional voices and to caricature anarchists and others as the progenitors of violence, it was Chile's ruling class who chose force over law*" (p.7). And they did so perfectly covered and protected by the forces of law and order, who organised lynch mob parties to raid workers' printing shops and the Fech hall. The instigators of this violence, as long as they were members of the golden elite, were always let go scot-free. In contrast, law students, such as Pedro Gandulfo, were banned from ever exercising their profession having their records being stained with the word "subversion". There is nothing new to the ruling class trampling over their own laws in order to force their way whenever they see fit. Anti-terror laws have been widely used over the last decades all over the world, from Colombia to Spain, and the USA of course. Chile, in this respect, has been no exception to the rule.

But class violence took also other sinister turns: as repression mounted against the "subversives", there was also a political campaign of ethnic cleansing going on in the north of Chile, a process which has been dismissed or simply not mentioned in official Chilean history. Labelled as a "Chileanisation" campaign, the Chilean state started stimulating mass migration of a distinctively Chilean population from the south into the northern territories which had been conquered through force from Peru some decades earlier. This policy was coupled with unspeakable harassment and violence, both official and para-official, against the local and native population, who were mostly of Peruvian descent. In a couple of decades the Chilean state managed to completely change the ethnic composition of those territories, a stain in Chilean history which has rarely been confronted even by the left. The xenophobic and racist component of this campaign, which involved acts of ethnic cleansing, went hand in hand with its criminal nature, something even questioned by the US consul in the city of Iquique, who informed the ambassador that "*the actual rounding up of those deported was in the hands of two men well known in Iquique for their criminal records (...) Ninety per cent of those deported are natives of the province (...) and are forced to go to Peru where they have neither homes nor interests*" (p.147). Not unlike the Red Scare in the US around the same time, Chile had passed a residency law to be applied to "undesirable" foreign elements in the eyes of the ruling bloc –ie, agitators or worker organisers- to be expelled from the country. The wave of expulsions, from one country to the next, led to the first coordination between repressive apparatuses in the neighbouring States of Chile, Argentina, Peru and Bolivia. Decades later, this coordination for the specific purpose of torture, killings, disappearances and the wanton abuse of the most basic human rights, would be revived during the horrific years of the Plan Condor during the 1970s. Among others, Casimiro Barrios would be persecuted by Chile, Peru and Bolivia, being ultimately killed and disappeared in 1931. As we see, the dictatorships that plagued the Southern Cone those years were far from an anomaly, and had, indeed, clear precedents in the 1920s. In the face of the current wave of xenophobia and brazen racism affecting most of the so-called first-world, and how it interacts with general repressive trends,

the detailed and compassionate review of events unfolding in Chile in the 1920s, gives us plenty of food for thought.

With mounting xenophobia and racism in Chile, coupled with witch-hunts and a most sophisticated repression on the one hand, and increasingly assertive students' and workers' movements, I'm glad to know that a Spanish translation has just been finished and that LOM editorial house is preparing its first Chilean edition. Certainly, progressive Chileans have much to learn from this reading. While some great history books have been written about this period and these characters (among them, the biography and works of Fabio Moraga and Carlos Vega published in 1995), this book is unique in bringing together these contextualised characters into a movement explored through the lens of current concerns. The battle for memory in Chile is still going on in full force; while many a great progress has been achieved in recovering from the State sanctioned amnesia memories of the Pinochet's regime savagery, the nasty repression of decades prior to the 1973 coup has largely lingered in a haze of oblivion.

Craib's narrative is both simple and elegant, at the same time. He avoids heavy specialist jargon and an unnecessarily complicated narrative style which are, unfortunately, common currency in the social sciences. Reading this book is nothing short of a joy. His style is engaging and it is indeed very difficult to put the book down while you start reading it. He brings together with great skill cultural commentary, with history, sociological insights, and anthropological concerns, blending it all into a narrative that flows steadily. Although this is a book about a particular time and place populated by people who make sense in this very specific context, it has much to teach radicals today facing similar challenges. As such, this is more than a history book and becomes a companion to people who are trying to change the world.

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