
In its essentials, and even in most of its details, this story has been told before. But in the way he puts it together, makes its components speak to one another, and wrings meanings and insights out of them, Raymond Craib’s rendering is quite novel – and inspiring. The story is set in post-World War I Santiago, a time of economic dislocation, social controversy and political ferment. As in much of the world at that time, the polity built in Chile during the nineteenth century, centred on an exclusionary aristocracy and a raw-material export economy, was suddenly thrown into systemic disarray, while the essential features of its twentieth-century successor were still not easy to discern. As Raymond Craib shows in this book, one not too unimaginable outcome, at least in the view of its contemporaries, was revolution – frightful prospect for some, electrifying promise for others. It is in fact this tension that sets the plot in motion, arraying its leading characters on one side or the other of a dividing line that some saw as ‘subversion’ (one of the book’s structuring episodes is what the period’s officialdom dubbed the ‘Trial of the Subversives’), and others, among whom Craib has chosen to highlight students and working-class anarchists, as liberation. It was a struggle waged on the streets, in the press (both elite and working-class), in university premises and Parliament halls, and that usually ended in police quarters or in gaol – and, in one particularly harrowing case that opens and closes the book, in a funeral cortege bound for Santiago’s cemetery.

As said above, this agitated juncture has captivated many analysts before, and is thus not unfamiliar to those with an interest in Chilean history. Raymond Craib, however, has given it an innovative narrative twist, making it appear at the same time particularly true to its own context, and disturbingly apposite to current-day concerns. He achieves this by weaving, in almost cinematographic fashion, a vast array of facts around a few decisive days, and a vast host of characters around four or five key protagonists. Jumping back and forth between a series of events that strikingly converged on one single date (19 July 1920), Craib manages to immerse his readers in the complexities of early-twentieth-century Chile without suffocating them under his unmistakable erudition. Likewise, by focusing his analysis around the deeds of a few leading actors – an immigrant activist, a young physician and former student leader, an anarchist typesetter, an authoritarian judge, a young working-class poet who tragically loses his life during abusive imprisonment – he brings historical processes closer to life, thus avoiding the perils of turning a story built out of anger, fear and passion into an exercise in cold political abstraction. Picking up on a very fruitful strain of current historiography, and to paraphrase the book’s subtitle, through deft literary plotting Craib has written a history that is poetic and political, general and personal, without sacrificing any scholarly rigour in the process.

To be sure, in setting out on this experiment, many risks were unavoidable. For one, even though other areas of the country show up briefly here and there, this is very much a story restricted to Santiago. This is largely a deliberate choice, as Chile’s capital becomes not only the setting, but virtually one more actor in Craib’s historical drama. In an effort to reinforce the ‘immediacy’ he has striven to convey throughout the book, he has taken visible pains to reconstruct the exact venues where his characters moved and his facts unfolded, bringing them much closer to the reader’s gaze. The cost of this, obviously, is to run against the grain of the decentralisation Chilean
scholarship has been aiming for in recent years, a not unwelcome trend in a country whose history has often been reduced to what happened in its capital.

In a similar vein, by intentionally highlighting a few individual or collective actors (students, anarchists, repressive agents), he has sidelined others who figure quite prominently in alternative renderings of this tale: reformist politicians like Arturo Alessandri, employers and their associations, socialists turned communists like Manuel Hidalgo or Luis Emilio Recabarren. In all fairness, it should be said that these exclusions are by no means absolute, as these characters do show up when historical accuracy or analytic pertinence call for it. More to the point, it should be stressed that Craib’s choices are not random or arbitrary: the story he has chosen to tell is not just that of an unusually titillating, because intense, historical juncture. It is rather a story of defiance, bred by human misery and social injustice, decoded by the powers-that-be as subversion, and met with, as usually happens, repression. That is why it is a story of young people and anarchists, of repressive officials and proto-fascist upper-class thugs. And that is why, through all this tension, Craib makes no pretence of taking the middle ground, or of hiding where his own sympathies lie.

Does this mean we are in the presence of “partisan” historiography, of rampant “ideology” posing as serious scholarship? Certainly not, as all the book’s assertions are supported by copious and carefully marshalled sources, and by a notable mastery of the relevant bibliography – including that produced in Chile itself, something regrettably not always present in First-World studies on Chile or Latin America. And certainly no more so than any other historical text trying to come to terms with real dramas experienced by real people at a time when past certainties seemed to crumble, and the future seemed open to all kinds of utopian or reactionary gambles: a time, that is, not that different from our own. It should thus come as no surprise that many of the stakes and many of the characters that crowd Craib’s book bear an unsettling resemblance to the ones that haunt present-day Chile: rebellious students, revitalised anarchists, shaken (but still powerful) defenders of the status quo trying to reclaim some legitimacy amid ever-widening cracks in what seemed, not so long before, an impregnable liberal or neoliberal hegemony. And because this is a drama that clearly transcends Chile’s national borders, because it re-enacts an age-long strife between rebels and custodians of the status quo, it is a book that should attract not only Chileans or followers of Chilean history, but anyone with any sensitivity towards human agency writ large. Anyone, that is, who bears any sensitivity towards those paradigmatic expressions of human agency that run through and underpin this fine work: politics, poetry and history.

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Over the past fifteen years, Argentines have been exposed regularly to the sound of former President and Senator Cristina Fernández de Kirchner’s voice on the radio and television. Some complain about her strident, hectoring tone, while others find her speeches inspiring, but nearly everyone agrees that she sounds a lot like another influential woman in Argentine history: Eva Duarte de Perón. ‘Evita’ was a successful