

DEMOCRATIZATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN CHILE

Mobilizing at the Urban Margins: Citizenship and Patronage Politics in Post-dictatorial Chile. By Simón Escoffier. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. 250. \$110.00 cloth.
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This is an interesting and original study of two *poblaciones* in Santiago, Chile, that had similar origins but evolved in two different directions. Simón Escoffier sets out to analyze why one, Nueva Amanecer, became more docile and demobilized and less militant politically over time, while the other, Lo Hermida, continued to challenge unjust authority and deprivation and to organize collective actions. “Why and how has mobilization survived since the dictatorship in some communities of the urban margins but not in others?” (3) the author asks. He conducted extensive research in these *poblaciones* to answer this question.

Escoffier introduces his framework of mobilizational citizenship, defined as a historically informed sense of identity and belonging that develops from collective endeavors, motivated by an alternative sense of political incorporation. Escoffier specifically contrasts his concept of mobilizational citizenship with liberal notions of the term, which assume that citizenship derives from the formal institutions of the nation-state. Tellingly, when Escoffier asked one *pobladora* what citizenship meant to her and her community, she responded that “we are not citizens, we are *pobladores!*” (14).

The author explains mobilizational citizenship as emerging from a cohesive political community engaged in communal, rights-seeking initiatives. He traces the near-century-old history of the *pobladores* in Chile and shows how these class-conscious shantytown dwellers became a potent political force and collective political agent with their own values, ideals, identity, and activist methods.

The book painstakingly develops and elaborates the mobilizational citizenship framework and its analytical components and provides detailed comparisons between the two *poblaciones*. Escoffier links the mobilization of communities such as Lo Hermida to larger processes of democratization and social change. He shows how the role of political parties was key in the histories of the two communities and how, since the dictatorship, the strategies of the political parties dominant in Lo Hermida and Nueva Amanecer have differed. In the former, more radical parties connected political action to the militant history of the *pobladores* and the left’s socialist project of previous decades. Residents were clear on the links between the democratic governments’ continuation of the dictatorships’ market-oriented policies and the continued exclusion, inequality, and lack of social protections in Chile. In Nueva Amanecer, more centrist parties sought to control and contain mobilization via a top-down, managerial approach. During the author’s fieldwork there, residents tended to blame one another for problems and rarely referred to the overarching sociopolitical system.

Escoffier captures well the dynamics of Chilean society and the factors that have provoked increasing disappointment and detachment from the political system within large social sectors since the transition to civilian government. “Despite appearances, Chile has developed a highly closed political structure that systematically excludes civil society from public decisions” (201). Unresponsive government administrations have failed to address the social needs of the urban poor and the working class in general. Many activists discredit the electoral system and the political parties (with the possible exception of the Partido Comunista) as part of the system that oppresses them (Chapter 5). Levels of abstention in recent elections in Chile have grown substantially. After the transition, Escoffier writes, “the country’s achievements evolved along a restrictive notion of democracy. Institutional politics became increasingly dominated by an upper-class elite, with little empathy with ordinary citizens” (77). Among the youth, especially, disillusionment and frustration have led many to withdraw from voting and formal politics. In 2019, unsatisfied expectations and the precarity of life in neoliberal Chile exploded in social rebellion. Escoffier’s analysis explains the roots of *el Estallido Social* well. It also sheds light on the unexpected outcome of the 2022 plebiscite to approve or not a new constitution—which took place after the book was written—when many marginalized sectors of the population voted against the progressive constitutional draft, which would have enshrined social rights such as access to quality health care, universal and free education, and livable pensions.

If at times the author’s exhaustive presentation of his framework may become somewhat repetitive, this book is an important contribution to the literature. Escoffier illustrates the sense of identity and historical continuity that motivates the politically engaged population of Lo Hermita and recognizes the importance of political consciousness and struggle in the process of democratization. He provides rich empirical evidence of life in the *poblaciones*. His theoretical contribution to studies of citizenship is relevant and useful. In sum, Escoffier’s analysis illuminates a little-studied dimension of contemporary popular politics in Chile.

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