Lost in the Long Transition

Struggles for Social Justice in Neoliberal Chile

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Chapter Seven

Cultural History "Written in the Margins": Political Ecology of Copper and Community in the "Little North"

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> Today is a day of national dignity and solidarity. It is a day of dignity, because Chile breaks with the past . . . and begins the final road of its economic independence that means its full political independence. [1]
>
> — Salvador Allende, July 11, 1971

At that optimistic juncture on the Plaza de Los Héroes in Rancagua, President Allende began his speech to celebrate the passing of a constitutional amendment that nationalized the copper industry in Chile, declaring with those words a "national day of dignity." Although Allende's government called itself *Unidad Popular*, or "Popular Unity," the period of its brief rule (1970–1973) was a time of societal upheaval, economic chaos, and political paralysis as the leftist coalition struggled to implement its transformation of Chilean society against opponents at home and abroad who were determined to see it fail. But in this instance, the word "solidarity" was closer to truth than hyperbole. Five days later, Law 17.450 transferred all current and future copper fields to the Chilean state, legislation that was backed by all political parties and had passed in the Chilean congress by unanimous vote.

In two years and two months Allende would be dead and his short-lived "peaceful road to Socialism"—"la Via Chilena"—would be violently ended by a military coup. The country that had earned a reputation as one of the most politically-open and stable democracies in Latin America would fall under the control of a brutal dictatorship that would last seventeen years. As this book has addressed, the economic policies put into place during the Pinochet regime (1973–1990) formed the blueprint for neoliberalism in the region as Chile in the 1980s and 1990s became the model to follow for countries restructuring their economies toward export-oriented production, free trade, and foreign investment. We have discussed how Pinochet's economists took an uncompromising position on privatization and zealously pushed free market principles. Copper, however, remained in the hands of the state. It had taken Chile more than half a century to wrest control of the mines from foreign ownership and the dictatorship realized that control of copper—often called "the nation's salary"—was of vital importance both economically and politically.

In the first half of this chapter, I provide a historical overview of the different—and often contradictory—meanings and functions of the commodity of copper and state copper policies in Chile. At various times, these have entailed nationalism, militarism, labor repression, popular resistance, globalization, and export dependency. In the second half, I discuss mining as a significant force in the political ecology of the Norte Chico region where the distinct cultural history of "comunero" ideology and identity developed as a consequence of the articulation of agricultural communities with the copper industry. Briefly drawing upon my ethnographic fieldwork, I conclude with a political ecology model representing the dynamic factors involved in the resiliency of community and culture in a semiarid land of limited environmental resources and cyclical drought.

Copper as Sovereignty

Under Allende, the complete nationalization of the copper mines became a popular issue strongly identified with national sovereignty and as an act of patriotism it had widespread public support that largely transcended ideological boundaries during that tumultuous era. While the moderate Christian Democrats and the far right blocked many other policies of Allende's socialist experiment, the political opposition tempered their reaction and supported a constitutional amendment to take control of the mines. Boorstein contends that had they not backed the measure in Congress the *Unidad Popular* could have put the issue to a plebiscite where it would have won easily.[2] In his postscript to a book of conversations with Régis Debray regarding the "Chilean Revolution" written just before his First Message To Congress, Allende appealed to the people of the United States to understand that nationalization of copper was a fight against colonizing corporations and was solely a matter of national sovereignty. He stressed that while his government's action against "the monopolies which have plundered the Chilean economy"[3] in order to "recover the basic natural resources of the country for the Chilean people"[4] would be seen as an aggressive action by the North American private interests it damaged, he emphasized that:

> [w]hen the Government and the people of Chile carry out the nationalization of their basic wealth, Chilean copper, they are not engaging in any action against the North American people, but placing at the service of Chile something which indisputably belongs to it. . . .We are confident that our action will be understood in its true light, that is, as the legitimate exercise of the rights of a worthy and sovereign people who will not hesitate to defend what is rightfully theirs.[5]

Allende was making good on a promise to complete what was a process long in the making. Although it came to be seen as a signature act of the Unidad Popular, controlling copper as a matter of both national patrimony and economic strategy was the culmination of nearly a half-century of populist rhetoric and state opportunism in Chile. During the 1930s Chile vigorously formed state-owned enterprises as a means of economic development and consolidation of state resources in an attempt to wrest control of their economies from foreign interests. At the time, Chile's economy was dominated by the large landholding oligarchy, a handful of domestic industrialists, a financial sector controlled by external powers, and a copper industry owned by three U.S. mining companies.[6]

Prior to the rise of copper, Chile's economy was dominated for a brief time in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by a foreign-controlled nitrates industry with mines in the northern desert. After the first World War, artificial nitrates entered the market, the industry collapsed and Chile's copper industry swiftly developed. Acquiring the Chuquicamata fields in northwest Chile near the city of Calama in 1912, the Guggenheim Brothers built what would become the largest mine in the world and ushered in the modern age of mining, transferring it to the Anaconda Copper Mining Company in 1923. Four decades before President Allende called copper "Chile's life-blood" there were nationalist calls in Congress to take over the mines and liberate this sector. While stopping short of nationalization of copper during this radical period of Chilean politics in the 1940s, the state sought to stake its claim through aggressive taxation of the foreign firms. A tax rate of 33 percent on foreign ownership resonated with the growing public hostility toward U.S. influence without seriously threatening domestic capitalist interests. Although initially antagonized, with the outbreak of war in Europe the U.S. once again came in need of Chilean copper. As a result, Chile's economy did well during World War II but experienced a slump after the war ended. This was followed by another rebound with an increased demand for copper exports a few years later when Americans went to war in Korea.[7]

By mid-century, Chuquicamata, the El Salvador mine—also owned by Anaconda—and the Kennecott Utah Copper Corporation's El Teniente mine were the three major enterprises. In 1955 the government of Carlos Ibáñez del Campo passed law 11.828 aimed at capturing excessive copper revenues through taxation and diminishing the power of the multinationals. By this time the mining companies had become largely self-contained and self-sustaining entities providing housing for laborers, generating their own electricity, and owning their own railways, schools, stores and security forces.[8] This populist government that focused on the nationalist issue of mining exports saw wages fall and unemployment rise as development was stunted in other areas.[9]

With copper wholly supplanting nitrates as Chile's foremost source of revenue the country's economic success was once again in service to the export of a raw, primary commodity. Development lessons from the experience with nitrates were not learned and rather than diversifying the economy or building domestic infrastructure, the state spent the majority of tax revenues toward financing its own general expenses and subsidizing imports. Importantly, instead of providing a new source of employment that the country greatly needed, labor was hit hard during the copper boom as new technology purchased abroad increased productivity at the expense of jobs. With these imbalances favoring the foreign-owned copper industry, though radical governments of the 1940s pushed hard for industrialization programs in other areas such efforts ultimately failed. Thus copper production as an economic strategy that was not integrated with the domestic economy of Chile transferred a considerable amount of revenue into state coffers while perpetuating Chile's dependency status and contributing to the nation's underdevelopment.[10] It is not surprising then that in contrast to other industries falling under state control during the Allende era, moderates and conservatives backed the nationalization of copper in 1971.

Even though there was consensus over nationalization in general, political sides differed over the issue of compensation to the U.S. corporations. The anti-Allende parties worried that his administration would reap too much political capital from the act. There was also much fear over the anticipated response of the United States. The expropriation was initially to be based on the "book value" of the mines but a metric of "excessive profits" was instituted to recoup earnings from years of exploitation. Comparing the multinationals' copper profits in Chile with their profits in other parts of the world, it was determined that the mining companies had earnings that went far beyond "normal business practice," a deduction which exceeded the sale value of most of their holdings. No compensation was given for Chuquicamata, El Teniente, and El Salvador and a marginal indemnity was received by the U.S. corporations for other properties. In response, the U.S. Department of State issued an ominous condemnation.[11]

Copper As Military Subsidy

The dictatorship's technocrats were determined to re-privatize all state-owned corporations that had been nationalized during the *Unidad Popular* but CODELCO (National Copper Corporation of Chile) was kept under state control as part of a series of "binding laws" (*leyes de amarre*) that forced reform though privatization of most other sectors of society. Recognizing that control of copper gave the military government an enormous strategic and financial advantage, advisors in the armed forces closest to Pinochet's ear were adamantly against returning the mines. The state's dilemma produced an ambivalent response—enacting privatization and laissez-faire policies with one hand while controlling the copper mines with the other. CODELCO was maintained but the U.S. companies hurt by state seizure of the mines were speedily re-compensated to their satisfaction in order to normalize Chile's relations with the superpower to the North. Additionally, foreign capitalists were encouraged with incentives to develop and expand new, private mining enterprises.

The military copper earnings allocation from CODELCO was initiated in the 1950s but it was greatly increased under Pinochet. In the post-dictatorship era, it has continued to present serious challenges to government control of military spending. By law, 10 percent of the export returns of CODELCO are transferred to the armed forces with the money being equally divided among all military branches. While the defense budget is tied to the rise and fall of copper prices (for example, in 2002 the amount fell to $235 million from a high of $341 million in 1995), if the returns from a bad year for copper fall below 225 million dollars, more than 10 percent is allowed to be siphoned off by the military. This amount cannot be pared or diverted to other areas and purchases for each branch are determined not by negotiated defense priorities but simply by the amount of money that is available.[12]

Controversy within the Chilean government over this control of CODELCO's revenues persisted, especially as foreign-owned private mines began to make substantial in-roads into the copper market. Throughout the 1970s, CODELCO was, in Gwynne's words, "milked" by the military government siphoning off maximum payments while putting minimal investment in the corporation. With the economic rebound in the 1980s, a "Copper Stabilization Fund" was set up in 1987 to reign in any sudden increases in government spending linked to the high price of copper. Tellingly, one of Pinochet's last acts before leaving office was to use the government receipts from the 1987–1989 Stabilization Fund account to reduce the nation's fiscal debt. This antagonized the incoming civilian government, which had already targeted the funds for many of the social programs on their agenda.[13] Despite the recent removal of the persistent "authoritarian enclaves" discussed in chapter 1, as Oppenheim observes, the military siphon of copper profits from CODELCO is "one major civil-military issue that has not yet been addressed . . . is not even part of the current political agenda and it is unclear when or how it will be raised."[14]

At the time of the nationalization, Chilean trade was completely dependent upon copper and the economy was extremely sensitive to changes in the world market price throughout the 1960s and 1970s as copper continued to comprise 80 percent of the value of exports. This sensitivity precipitated a major economic depression in the early years of the dictatorship when the price of copper fell sharply.[15] While keeping CODELCO under state control, the dictatorship, knowing that it did not have the resources to fund the exploration and development of new mines aggressively solicited the return of foreign investment and ownership. As discussed by Vergara in chapter 4, 1974's Decree Law 600, also known as the Statute of Foreign Investment, issued a set of incentives and guarantees to foreign investors, including fixed tax rates, unrestricted repatriation of capital, and generous write-offs in the first five years of operation.[16] The 1983 Mining Act, as Vergara discusses, institutionalized these incentives and privileges enjoyed by transnational capitalists under the principle of "nondiscrimination" against foreign interests over Chilean mining companies.[17] Despite the diversification drive and export boom in agricultural products, fruit, and wine during the Pinochet era, the share of copper remained stalled at 50 percent throughout the 1980s and subsequently low copper prices between 1982 and 1986 exacerbated Chile's extreme debt crisis when the economy sharply declined and stagnated during the bust years. However, copper prices were soaring with economic recovery in 1987 and Chile began its record succession of high yearly growth rates.[18]

Copper As Labor Struggle

Luring foreign investment in the mines worked hand in hand with lowering wages and weakening unions. The copper industry in the country was radically restructured by cutting labor costs and maximizing profits through extreme policies of what is glossed in technocrat-speak as "rationalization." Union activity in Chile was suspended in 1973 and not permitted again until the establishment in 1979 of a regressive Labor Code (*Plan Laboral*) that restrictively institutionalized many disadvantages to labor: temporary workers were excluded from joining; unions were not allowed in public sector occupations like education (in order to punish teachers, whose previous union was strongly pro-Allende); and, collective bargaining activities were hamstrung in favored export industries like fruit and copper.[19]

Severe limits placed on the right of copper workers to strike were justified by the Code's classification of copper as a special industry in which a halt in production would deprive the public of needed goods, endanger the economy, and threaten national security. Employers were allowed to hire replacements and no strike could last longer than sixty days. After sixty days workers were faced with the choice of accepting the terms offered by the company or losing their jobs. Additionally, leaders were hand-picked by the government and the company and were for the most part viewed by the rank and file as functionaries of the dictatorship. As a result of these setbacks, real wages between 1973 and 1983 fell by more than 30 percent. CODELCO carried out cost-cutting rollbacks in wages and benefits, critically gutting medical and health benefits related to illness and injury associated with mining. Rapid mechanization and introduction of new technologies also hurt labor by increasing production, lowering costs, and shrinking the workforce. All of this allowed higher profits even during times of falling copper prices on the global market.[20] Many jobs were lost as productivity increased through the importation of machinery, the expense of which was equalized by the savings on labor and other local costs.[21] By 1986 more than half of the laborers working at the El Teniente mine were temporaries employed by scores of private contractors and paid about half the wages made by the miners at CODELCO, without benefits, job security or much chance to organize.

Yet, in spite of the diminished position of organized labor—union membership had plummeted from 41 percent of the labor force in 1973 to 9 percent by the early 1980s—labor played a significant role in expressing social unrest and in the popular mobilizations against Pinochet.[22] A far-reaching resistance movement emerged with the economic collapse of the early 1980s. With political parties of the Left banned, organized labor worked to mobilize opposition against the regime as the Copper Workers Confederation (CTC) led the way to oppose the economic and labor policies of the government.[23] In May 1983, while the country was in the depths of recession, CTC ground production to a halt in Chile's copper mines, calling a one day general strike that was coordinated with a national day of protest against the dictatorship. Stern notes that "[t]o the surprise of everyone, Chile erupted" as nationwide and across class lines people at great risk and in large numbers overcame a decade of fear and fragmentation that had kept the opposition divided.[24] Tens of thousands came out of the shadows and into the streets to take part in demonstrations against authoritarian rule and neoliberal policies in a pivotal moment in the consolidation of the resistance to Pinochet. [25]

In previous times, due to the importance of the commodity, copper unions had enjoyed a better relationship with the Chilean state than other industries. However, during the political and economic chaos of the Allende nationalization (currency crisis, hyperinflation, production stalled by lack of parts as a result of the U.S. boycott, e.g.) union leadership was dominated by the Christian Democrat opposition and crippling strikes and stoppages were backed by enemies of the Socialist government. During this time miners struck more than eighty times, including two complete shutdowns and a lengthy and bloody strike at El Teniente between April and July 1973 that served to discredit and destabilize Allende's *Unidad Popular*. As a result, there was a little less persecution of copper unions than of other labor organizations during the initial stage of the dictatorship, however, it soon became clear that labor would suffer greatly as the neoliberal agenda was institutionalized.[26]

Not only fighting for their own rights and interests, miners took actions that helped to end military rule as, Winn notes, strikes and protests from copper workers "mobilized both a resurgent labor movement and the broader social protests against the Pinochet regime of the 1980s."[27] A direct protest against neoliberalism in general and the regressive Labor Code in particular, the strikes—and others that followed as the movement for democracy gained momentum over the next few years—as described by Klubock, "constituted one of the first broad challenges to the dicatorship's repressive policies and economic model and signaled the rebirth of a civilian opposition."[28] By the time the economic crisis of the early 1980s was over and the Chilean economy began to take off in mid-decade, both social change and the end of the authoritarian rule were imminent. When change finally arrived, however, it was not accompanied by economic change in the form of altering the neoliberal model in order to right the inequities and setbacks to labor brought by those who bore the cost of the "Chilean Miracle."

Vergara's chapter shows how in the post-dictatorship era mining activists once again stepped up to challenge neoliberal policies that threaten labor at large. Previous efforts in 1997 to privatize mining and energy sectors were countered with the threat of a full-scale protest movement by the Copper Workers' Federation.[29] In recent years, the transition era governments have been charged with cutting production in the state-owned mines as a means of attracting private investors in new enterprises that would be free from both military profit-siphoning and union workers. As the state sought to stimulate foreign investment in new mining ventures at the expense of increasing production in the state-controlled mines, the unions, having defended the patrimony of copper against foreign domination during the nationalization era came to see themselves, according to Klubock, as holding "the moral authority to represent the demands of all of Chile for democracy and an end to the neoliberal experiment."[30] Other fields were recovering union rights in the first years of the transition, but affiliation in mining actually dropped by 15 percent between 1988 and 1994. Union recruitment and retention of membership was hit hard as mining became the leading employment sector in the use of subcontracting. "Employment without contract" was on the rise and by the end of the 1990s, nearly a quarter of the mining labor force fell into this category of lower wage workers.

As Frank notes, the difficulties that subcontracted workers face—organizing a critical mass of laborers within the same company at the same time—allows firms to market themselves as "union-free" companies.[31] Subsequently, in the political rhetoric of neoliberalism seeking to discredit grievances and pit organized labor against other workers, miners greatly resent being labeled a "privileged labor aristocracy" accused of protecting obsolete self-interested economics that put both the country's economic health and democracy itself at risk.[32] Today, while employees in the private sector have the right to strike, this right is still regulated by the state, with replacement workers allowed after a period of time. Employees of a wide range of "essential service" companies remain prohibited from striking or have limits placed on the timing of their actions.[33] In short, is easier to organize a union now in Chile and that right is generally protected, but the actual power of unions to bargain collectively is significantly constrained by government regulation.

Copper As Dependency: Limits to Export Diversification

The liberalization of foreign investment that began in 1974 and the mining legislation that followed paved the way for massive investment into the copper sector. During the Long Transition, expansion through exploration and the opening of new mines by foreign-owned private companies tripled the output of copper by 1997. Asian markets became a significant part of this new growth, with Chile becoming the top copper supplier to Japan as well as a major exporter to most other markets in the region.[34] No matter the rhetoric and realities of the miracle years, as described in chapter 1, the global downturn of 1997–1998 that ended the decade of unprecedented growth demonstrated the risks of export-orientation and the limits to diversification. Loveman observes with irony that when the Asian Crisis struck while most policy-makers and observers in the present-day Chile of an open economy and massive foreign investment viewed the previous generation's Dependency Theory critique of capitalism as a nationalistic and Leftist relic of a bygone era, the country nonetheless remained, in his words, a "highly dependent" economy, dependent not only on price variability for its copper and other exports but also:

> dependent on foreign sources for oil, coal, and natural gas to fuel the economy; dependent for its competitiveness, in part, on non-enforcement of environmental regulations, insecure working conditions, and low wages in the labor force; dependent on decisions made by international consortia and transnational financial conglomerates; and dependent on actions by policymakers in Asia, Europe, and the United States.[35]

Copper's importance even rose in the last five years of the twentieth century as the rapid expansion of non-copper products began to level off. "Non-traditional exports" which experienced exceptional growth in the 1980s gradually decelerated and copper "counterweighted" them with increased growth.[36] There have been recent attempts to limit the economy's "exposure" to price volatility but even most extreme free market disciples feel that Chile has not done enough to lessen its dependency on the fortunes of copper. There are limits to the copper stabilization hedge strategy of drawing funds during serious profit losses. For example, in 2001 the effects of a market free fall were enormous when the price of copper plummeted to its lowest mark in fifteen years to a value that was in real terms lower than it was during the Great Depression. In response the Lagos government sought to stimulate foreign investment in new plants by enticing outside interests with tax breaks.[37]

From the point of view of the working class and poor, continued dependency on the volatility of copper prices under neoliberalism produces a double-standard in terms of the benefits of the wealth that is generated. While government belt-tightening is necessary during these bust years, the shortfalls in spending on social services have not been adequately made up during the boom periods. When times are good on the world market and the state's treasury is flush with copper revenue, there is pressure to reverse the austerity policy of holding onto this surplus in anticipation of inevitable lean years. In the early years of Bachelet's presidency world copper prices hit record highs, having skyrocketed from sixty cents per pound in 2001 to four dollars in 2006. During the long student strike described in chapter 1, there were resounding criticism from those who could not understand why a government that promotes itself as progressive refused to release some of this money to fund education and other social programs in need. "Copper sky high, education at rock bottom" proclaimed a huge banner hung on the main building at the University of Chile as the confrontation between students and police turned violent in Santiago.[38] "Third Way" efforts toward greater social equity, it seems, can only move so far. The neoliberal model with copper as its ballast sits anchored to the political center of gravity.

So far in this chapter, I have detailed the unique role of the commodity of copper in the history of Chilean neoliberalism. To review, it is a role that is fraught with the "enduring contradictions of neoliberalism" outlined in the introductory chapter of this book. On the one hand, copper was an exception to the ideological pillars of privatization and laissez-faire economics, as the authoritarian state benefited from its control. On the other hand, subsequent legislation that sought to stimulate foreign investment opened the door for new mining enterprises owned by multinational corporations. Today the state controls about one-third of the country's copper production. In the neoliberal era, both the military's profiteering from state-owned copper and the power of organized labor came to be seen from the technocratic, rationalist perspective as standing in the way of efficiency and economic development. Economist Milton Friedman, the patriarch of the Chicago Boys (see chapter 1 and chapter 5 by Daughters) continued to urge the Chilean state to privatize CODELCO.[39]

As many have argued elsewhere (for example, see Winn, et al.[40]), gains during the so-called "Economic Miracle" years were made at the expense of the working class by way of the dictatorship's regressive labor legislation that has only recently been modified. Yet despite its diminished role and periods of persecution, organized labor played a key role in the popular mobilizations that helped end the Pinochet regime and unions continue to speak out against neoliberalism in today's "Third Way" Chile.

Copper remains supreme in Chile's export-driven economic strategy. The world's largest producer of copper sees its fortunes rise and fall on both its price on the world market and on the economic health of its trading partners. Softening the blows of price volatility has required state intervention, as has diversifying exports into other areas. Advances have been made in this respect, as booms in fruit production and agriculture bear out. But while copper may no longer be the sole source behind Chile's position in the world economic system and Chile may enjoy relative growth and prosperity in comparison to other Latin American countries, expanded ties of trade and foreign ownership perpetuate a dependency status that persists decades after Dependency Theory was banished from the economic strategies of Chilean policy-makers.

Political Ecology and the Nature of Community

In the previous sections, I presented a general summary of the magnitude of the production of copper and its importance as a symbol of national sovereignty, a source of power for the military, a battleground for the struggles of organized labor, and the means of both wealth and dependency in neoliberal Chile, noting the often contradictory relationship between the neoliberal model and control over this commodity—and control over the labor that produces it. In the remaining pages of this chapter, I place information from my earlier ethnographic study of an agricultural community (*comunidad agrícola*) in north-central Chile (the "Norte Chico" sector of Regions III & IV, Copiapó and Coquimbo) into the macro-level historical, political, economic, and environmental context of copper. In this region, copper and the history of mining played a major role in the formation of these communities and in shaping their changing relationship with the Chilean state. Copper mining initiated environmental degradation in this now semi-arid desert region through massive deforestation as forests were felled to fuel reverbatory furnaces and to support operations, setting into motion the resulting competition for water and limited resources. Mining also stimulated the development of class consciousness among migrant workers politicized by the international labor movement who returned to the agricultural communities to create and promote institutions of solidarity and consensus-building over control of community resources and issues of land use. This leftist affiliation and local level democracy led to both conflict and community cohesion during the tumultuous political shifts of late twentieth-century Chile.

Analysis of a single major commodity is a useful tool for identifying formative relations in a region's political ecology that link seemingly "marginal" local communities with wider structures of power. Of course, commodities and their impacts by themselves do not tell the whole story. For example, in their examination of deforestation in Honduras, Stonich and DeWalt note the value of a political ecology perspective in broadening the analytical framework beyond myopic assignation of blame on particular commodities since underlying socioeconomic relations are responsible for poverty and environmental degradation regardless of which commodities are produced.[41] As Watts points out, one of the great values of a political ecology analysis is that it allows for a "refined concept of marginality" in which political, ecological, and economic features influence and strengthen each other, such as in the widespread pattern identified by Blaikie and Brookfield that "land degradation is both a result and a cause of social marginalization."[42] This process is apparent in the rugged interior of the Norte Chico where I conducted fieldwork between 1996 and 1999.

Applying a World-Systems theoretical perspective to an ecological model and an analysis of environmental resource issues, early political ecology relied upon a macro-level structural Marxist framework that focused on the human transformation of Nature into surplus and linked local ecology to the tripartite global economic class structure of core, periphery, semi-periphery.[43] Using what Watts calls the "tool kit of political economy," Wolf reframed environmental research by asking critical questions about access to and control over natural resources and the subsequent clashes between competing systems of surplus accumulation, distribution, and property rights in the colonial encounter and in neocolonial relations. This was an advancement over previous human ecology models that limited analysis of environmental degradation (and the potential solutions to environmental crises) to causal factors of technology, population increase, culture, and land use practices.[44] Wolf and others drew upon a Marxian model of social relations of production as a dialectical space of tension between "possibilities" of human activity and innovation and the "constraints" of environmental limitations and sociopolitical forces of the expansion of capitalism. This opened up new, critical areas of research.[45]

Starting in the 1990s researchers using a political ecology perspective began to view from various key vantage points the nature of "community" as compromised of a number of formative meanings and aspects. Communities are sites where local knowledge is produced and where resources are exploited, conserved, and managed; but also as a "repository of tradition," a community is a space of shared meanings and activities, both symbolic and material cultural funds from which participants draw in the course of constructing identity and making a living. When put in the service of claiming property and rights, these forms of identification are often constructed in opposition to the state or the forces of transnational capital in the struggle over resources. A political ecology framework renders these cultural expressions as dynamic, fluid, and situated in practice in ways that would elude historicist or cultural ecology interpretations.[46]

In anthropology, the seminal works of Gupta and Ferguson[47] in their postmodern critiques of development and Roseberry[48] in his revitalization of peasant studies argued against the essentializing view that cultures are "naturally the property of a spatially localized people"[49] and that communities are fundamentally geographically-bounded or territorially-fixed entities. Recognizing that communities and cultures in today's world are situated in transnational spaces and actively engaged with global power structures, they present a model of the local that avoids the structuralist and orientalist traps of exaggerating false representations of isolation, difference, and passivity in our treatment of ethnographic and anthropological subjects. Biersack recognizes the significance of the "place concept" that developed along these lines in the new political ecology. The dynamics of my model also requires a geographically and temporally expansive concept of community as articulated with external economies, histories, and ideologies. By recognizing both "discursive and material asymmetry" a place-based approach that strives to "reconceptualize globalizing processes in non-vertical terms" sees communities as situated within fields that are "both locational and relational."[50]

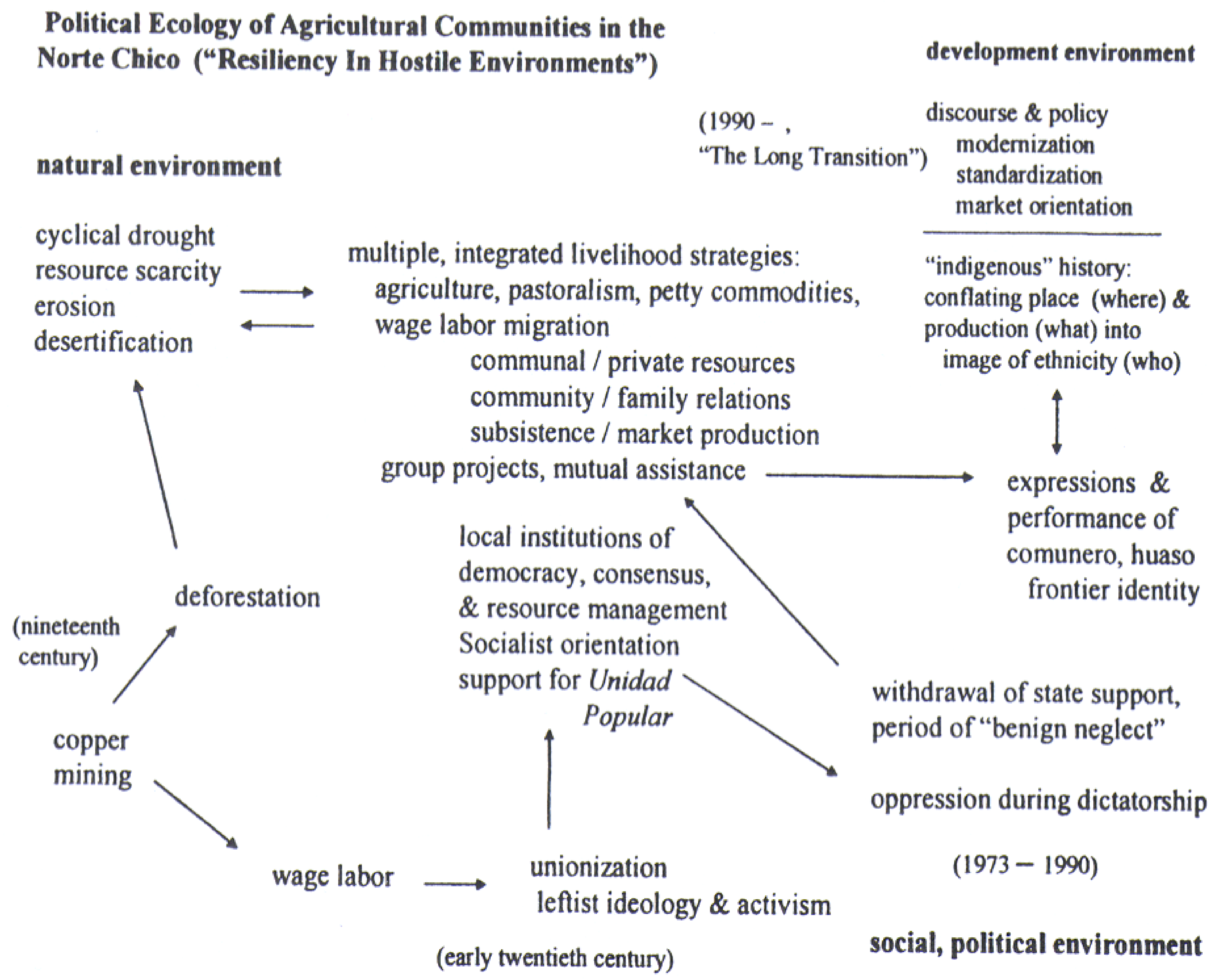
Additionally, political ecology that makes use of post-structuralist theory and discourse analysis is applicable to my ethnographic study's concerns with the contested and negotiated meanings of property and property rights and the rationality of traditional knowledge and risk management practices in the development discourse of neoliberal Chile.[51] For example, within the development apparatus, reliance on a "tragedy of the commons" scenario is one of those "persistent narratives" of development identified by Roe that, in telling a persuasive story with apparently predictable, self-evident, universal outcomes validates the efforts of such "blueprint development"—policies directed from a centralized, hierarchal system of knowledge.[52] That registering land with the state increases productivity is another one of these presumed outcomes. The familiar structure and content of these narratives carry their own meanings and bring their own authority to bear by reducing, as Edelman and Haugerud call it, "the empirical ambiguities and complexities development agencies find difficult to digest."[53] Along these same lines, Tsing notes that in identifying the construction of categories and the legitimizing power of language, political ecologists combining political economy with post-structuralist discourse analysis have come to see how such development narratives "shape landscape change even as they so often misread the landscape."[54]

Political Ecology of the Norte Chico

A political ecology framework provides a holistic historical, social, political, economic, and environmental context for understanding the formation of the agricultural communities and some important aspects of their relationship with the Chilean state. Figure 7.1 illustrates the key events and processes of this history, beginning with the rapid deforestation of the Norte Chico that occurred as a result of the expansion of the copper industry in the region. The cultural expressions and livelihood adaptations that I identified are represented in this model as in a dynamic relationship between people, the land, and the state. At key points in this history, environmental degradation, state violence, and neoliberal policies posed formidable challenges that community members have faced. In terms of what I call "comunero culture," none of these powerful influences should be seen as either a constitutive, determining or a disabling force. In the space where traditions, environmental limits, and state control converge, people produce and reproduce their lives and livelihoods through periods of cultural change, accommodation, resistance, and innovation. This process I termed "resiliency in hostile environments" (to include natural, social, political, and development environments that have all experienced great changes in recent decades) as a way to describe this particular example of the persistence of peasant culture in what might appear to be a "peripheral" part of Latin America. By looking at the regionally and nationally important production of copper for world markets and following the lines of environmental, socio-economic, and political impacts and consequences in Chile, one can see that comunero cultural history may appear to have been "written in the margins" but its significance is far from marginal.

Copper mining in the early decades of the nineteenth century brought massive deforestation with more than 80 percent of tree loss happening in a forty year period.[55] Resource scarcity and related environmental problems made it necessary for people to engage in multiple livelihood strategies, some of which like rain-fed cereal growing and overgrazing of goats and sheep exacerbate these problems today. Agricultural communities in the Norte Chico are comprised of

Figure 7.1



Political Ecology of Agricultural Communities in the Norte Chico ("Resiliency In Hostile Environments")

development environment
(1990 – , "The Long Transition")
discourse & policy
modernization
standardization
market orientation
"indigenous" history:
conflating place (where) & production (what) into image of ethnicity (who)
natural environment
cyclical drought
resource scarcity
erosion
desertification
multiple, integrated livelihood strategies:
agriculture, pastoralism, petty commodities,
wage labor migration
communal / private resources
community / family relations
subsistence / market production
group projects, mutual assistance
expressions & performance of comunero, huaso frontier identity
local institutions of democracy, consensus, & resource management
Socialist orientation
support for Unidad Popular
deforestation
(nineteenth century)
copper mining
withdrawal of state support, period of "benign neglect"
oppression during dictatorship
(1973 – 1990)
wage labor
unionization
leftist ideology & activism
(early twentieth century)
social, political environment

indivisible communal land, a "closed access" commons with a limited number of comunero titles and rights, and a participatory decision-making structure, all of which serve to manage scarce resources.[56] Families reproduce their livelihood in this semiarid region where drought is chronic and poverty is widespread through a combination of pastoralism, farming, petty commodity production of handcrafted goods, and wage labor migration. As my fieldwork spanned three years of extreme resource variability—drought, heavy rainfall, followed by the return of drought—I observed a wide range of flexible risk management strategies and reciprocal exchanges that these people make use of at both the family and community level. Their diverse economic strategies are closely linked to changing environmental conditions.

With one of these livelihood strategies—labor migration to copper mines—migrants participating in the early movement to organize mine workers returned home to shape community democracy and cooperative structure. Legislation during the progressive Frei government (1964–1970)—in conjunction with efforts to promote unionization in rural areas—recognized the land tenure system of the agricultural communities and protected the customs of self-governance that comuneros acquired from the unions through generations of mining and migration experience.[57] This Socialist orientation and support for Allende's Unidad Popular government led to retaliatory oppression during the long Pinochet dictatorship.[58] Withdrawal of state support during this dark time caused communities to turn inward and rely heavily upon increased domestic subsistence production and expansion of group projects and forms of mutual assistance.[59]

In my ethnography, I differentiated between work-focused forms of mutual assistance—such as group harvests using common land and shared labor—and social forms of mutual assistance—such as horse races and rodeos. In the former, individual families used their shares from the group project to offset production costs of their individual harvests, of which the renting of machinery was the most significant.[60] In the latter, competitions are staged to raise money for "common good" community improvements—such as the installation of electricity and potable water and the construction of a new school to replace one that was destroyed in an earthquake—and for the benefit of individuals in need—such as those in need of medical assistance and housing.[61] In the absence of expensive irrigation systems, both of these forms take place during years when sufficient rain makes farming possible and provides adequate forage for goats and sheep. Such years of bustling human activity contrast strongly with years of drought in which the community may essentially depopulate as some residents migrate to work in urban areas or in the mines while others move with their animals to rent fields in agricultural river valleys to sell the products of their livestock in order to make ends meet until the rain returns.[62] During good years, forms of mutual assistance maximize accessibility of both labor at home and of migrants who return home to spend money during holidays and social events.

The traditional comunidad structure is certainly not without its critics within the community itself. It is a kind of limited democracy since only those holding the title of comunero have the right to use the land and the right to vote in their elections and meetings—a kind of local citizenship that was often described as limited mostly to aging men (the image of a moribund unproductive community where "old miners return to die" which my ethnography challenged.) However, this was changing rapidly as comunero democracy, oppressed and underground during the darkest days of the dictatorship, re-emerged revitalized during the Long Transition with many women leaders taking a public advocacy role.[63]

Common good projects and aid to individuals generated by mutual assistance projects serve to mitigate potential tension between comuneros and non-comunero residents of communities by redirecting, to a degree, concentrations of individual wealth toward funds of community benefit. While there are wealth, power, generational, and gender differences within the community, in general, the community system of production and resource access is marked by a combination of individual- and group-directed practices and motivations reflecting the integrated communitarian and individualistic spirit and ideals of comunero culture.[64] In the Norte Chico—similar to Daughters' descriptions of Chiloé in chapter Five—as indivisible corporate property which cannot be lost on the open market and which facilitates reciprocity in the form of labor-sharing, assistance, and wealth-redistribution, the community system acts as a means of security taking up the slack in areas where state social services are lacking.[65] (As many of the chapters in this book demonstrate, such socioeconomic buffers have become increasingly important in neoliberal Chile.) Potential rupture between comuneros and other families, I argued, was tempered by a reciprocally beneficial tension that produces institutions of assistance.[66] This bond between "the community" and "the individual" is properly seen as a key risk management tool in a land of scarce and unpredictable resources.

While building up funds for community projects, many of the social forms of mutual assistance, such as rodeo and horse races, are opportunities to publicly express comunero and "huaso" cowboy identities that claim a place for the community in the historical narrative of the Republic.[67] Linked to the settling of the northern frontier, these expressions and identities—providing a counter-narrative to that of marginal people living on marginal lands—at times contrast with "indigenous" images of traditions and origins propagated by economic development discourse in the promotion of modernization and standardized market-oriented production. Such discourse—which I called "policy-positioned ascriptions of ethnicity, identity, and history"—conflates aspects of where these people live (a relatively isolated, rugged interior, marginal lands whose inhabitants, one pamphlet claimed were descendents of "*indigenas arriconadas*" [literally, "Indians pushed into the corners"]) and what they do to make a living (rain-fed subsistence farming and low-input pastoralism on degraded land) into an image-subject of who they are in ethnic terms (a backward "Other" in need of modernization and state intervention).[68] At other times, development discourse offered images of comunero culture as possessing attitudes of (1) a "mining mentality" toward the land through resource overuse (overgrazing, erosion caused by wheat cultivation, etc.) or (2) an antiquated anticapitalist communalism now left out of neoliberal Chile's path to prosperity because of its stubborn refusal to change. My fieldwork and analysis of the resilience of successful households refuted such facile representations.

In my ethnography I used "resiliency" as a term to describe the persistence, adaptability, and complexity of the social and economic strategies used to reproduce both family livelihood and community structure in response to environmental, political, and economic challenges.[69] I propose that recognizing such complexity requires broader and more flexible models when "community" is the unit of analysis. (I offer the phrase "mutable mobile mode of resource maximization" as a way to identify a functioning arrangement of economic, family, and social elements that is capable of changing form in response to changes in the wider environments with which it is articulated while maintaining its integral connections.)[70] Policy makers should also take a closer look at such diversity of livelihood options and the impact that laws and projects may have when they threaten this diversity. One example that served as a set piece in my discussion of development programs in neoliberal Chile was a controversy from the late 1990s in which a state law regulating the hygienic production of goat cheese in the Norte Chico was coupled with a market integration plan that ended up excluding the majority of small producers who were most dependent on this production of this petty commodity, especially during itinerant seasons of migration during years of drought.[71] I treated this as an example of development in which standardization creates a problem and then presents itself as the solution.[72]

Conclusion: Consciousness, Identity, Space, and Place

Migrant families who relied on the portability of cheese production along with other handcrafted goods were the ones most adversely affected by the law above, which aimed to improve the price and the regional image of the product along with its production standards. Those living in areas without access to electricity and running water found their previous market niche in a gray area between formal and informal now edging toward black. Some of them ironically saw themselves as in the process of being turned into "clandestine artisans" by a well-intended but misguided program. To me, this illustrates how comunero livelihood in the Norte Chico is situated in an economic development blindspot because of the cultural space it occupies between formal and informal economies, between individual, family, and community motivations and methods, and between social and work-focused forms of mutual assistance.

In an urban example from the capital, Stillerman likewise explored how social identities are constructed and challenged via state regulation of economic activities. His study of the struggle for space in a Santiago farmer's market shows how in both a physical sense and an ideological one the market itself can be a contested space.[73] The shadowy distinction between "formal" and "informal" economies is a problem with which economic anthropologists have long been concerned.[74] Cutting edge work deals with the power that state-sanctioned institutions wield in bestowing legitimacy upon certain economic forms and illegitimacy upon others.[75] Intentional or not, modernization or standardization development programs (ironically informed by or at least paying lip service to laissez-faire economics) may hinder or exclude altogether small-scale producers or vendors. Stillerman's Santiago street vendors resist this by claiming an intermediate niche—staking out a "semiformal" position—that challenges the modern/backward binary as they elude the intrusions of official recognition and regulation while availing themselves of the positive protections of legality.[76]

In this chapter I have used copper as a critical point of departure for exploring contested terrains of livelihood and identity in the political ecology of the agricultural communities of the Norte Chico, the "Little North" that had been the nation's northern frontier until the 1880s. The concluding chapters of this book offer further contributions to the study of convergences of space, place, and identity in anthropology and sociology.[77] In Olavarria's chapter 8, it is the struggle for decent housing and a satisfying community life that has shifted class consciousness toward a community place-based identification in contemporary urban Chile. The street children in Salazar's chapter 9 find themselves subject to state discursive practices that define and establish distinctions between citizenship and criminality. Finally, the returning migrant women described by Altamirano in chapter 10 are finding their own way "home" in a personal journey marked by evolving identities as women, activists, and citizens in a country that has changed greatly since the time of their exile and during the neoliberal continuities of the Long Transition.

Notes

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