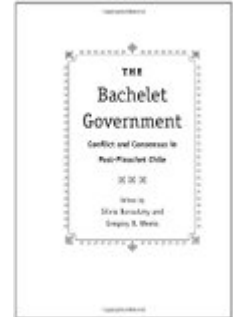


**Silvia Borzutzky, Gregory B. Weeks, eds..** *The Bachelet Government: Conflict and Consensus in Post-Pinochet Chile*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010. 224 pp. \$69.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-3475-1.



**Reviewed by** Jadwiga E. Pieper Mooney

**Published on** H-LatAm (May, 2011)

**Commissioned by** Dennis R. Hidalgo (Virginia Tech)

When Michelle Bachelet became president of Chile in 2006, many were astounded that this socially conservative country--where women have long experienced severe gender-based discrimination within the established political party system--would place the reins of power in the hands of a woman. In this context, it seemed all the more exciting to witness some of the successes her government would score in this male-dominated political world. Bachelet promptly kept her campaign promise of achieving gender parity in key political appointments, starting with a cabinet split evenly between men and women. Her ambitious efforts to promote a more equal society bore fruit in the formation of commissions to identify key areas in need of reform. However, when these commissions stimulated dialogue on policy disputes, but failed to provide concrete solutions, they became double-edged swords. Silvia Borzutzky and Gregory B. Weeks's edited volume provides the proper analytical context to assess the contradictory role these commissions played in Bachelet's new Chile. In addition, the themati-

cally diverse and consistently well-researched chapters offer new insights into core subjects of the twenty-first century: the environment and indigenous peoples' rights; labor, educational, and economic policies; and questions regarding gender equity and women's rights. Most of all, the book presents an excellent study of the difficult negotiations among interest groups with competing ideas concerning the course of democratic development and economic organization.

As evident from the title, the ongoing tensions between conflict and consensus in post-Pinochet Chile create a meaningful link among the chapters, but the theme of continuity and change appears equally relevant. After all, Chileans still cope with the heritage of a military dictatorship and authoritarian technocrats who rewrote significant sections of the constitution and implemented neoliberal economic policies that represented a substantial break from earlier decades. Civil-military relations, for example, remain a highly sensitive subject in a country that still lives with the memory of human rights violations, torture,

and disappearances of dissidents. Weeks, in his chapter “Civil-Military Relations and the Limits of Consensus,” convincingly demonstrates just how difficult it is to categorize the civil-military relations in Bachelet’s Chile as truly democratic. He argues that most studies have ignored Chilean political actors, the voters themselves, and their perception of the military’s role in politics after the return to civilian rule in the 1990s. In light of this striking absence, according to Weeks, we not only should rethink how we define the Chilean transition to democracy, but also should refrain from calling it complete. The mere longing for consensus among the members of the then ruling Concertación-coalition government and the opposition should not compromise the commitment to a human rights agenda and the official condemnation of all the military’s human rights violations. Other chapters successfully document that dissatisfied Chileans with political agency find ways other than “formal” political participation to voice their concerns.

The first serious crisis in Bachelet’s presidency occurred in the form of the now-famous “Revolution of the Penguins,” when secondary education students barricaded their schools in protest over the costs and the structure of the educational system. Mary Rose Kubal cleverly presents the domestic idiosyncrasies of these events, even as they occurred simultaneously as regional manifestations of anti-neoliberal social movement activity in other Latin American countries. Kubal admits that Bachelet’s adherence to the Concertación’s neoliberal consensus helps “explain the slow and piecemeal policy response” to the students’ protests (p. 129). Yet we see a parallel, a very different effect of consensus-based politics: the Chilean government responded to public opinion, which explains why reform propositions occurred along with neoliberal structural constraints. Kubal shows that the Penguins had a chance to be heard because the Chilean leadership so carefully

negotiated conflict and consensus, continuity and change, and the military’s neoliberal legacies.

Bachelet’s presidency was further troubled when copper miners went on strike for better wages, and when many Chileans showed little understanding for the president’s refusal to spend more of the profit of the then-thriving gains of the copper industries. Bachelet’s problems only intensified when economic growth slowed shortly after her election, and when its later increase was not as brisk as it was in the final years of the previous administration. The chapters by Borzutzky and Kirsten Sehnbruch provide compelling analytical contexts for these events. Borzutzky explains the impossible tasks Bachelet set for herself as she attempted to “tame” the market by pursuing new socioeconomic policies to reduce inequalities. Sehnbruch focuses on the president’s struggle to fulfill her election manifesto, the promise of “more and better employment” for Chilean workers. Both authors show that Bachelet was rendered painfully powerless as she sought to cope with the economic forces of the global marketplace and with inherited problems of labor and employment structures that imposed obstacles left by previous governments. Indeed, Bachelet was often blamed for “sins” she did not commit, and the Chilean media exploited the image of a “paralyzed” president, also in the aftermath of the fiasco surrounding Santiago’s new public transportation system that was unveiled (yet not planned) under her presidency. The buses of the modern Transantiago system proved inadequate for the narrow streets of the Chilean capital, broke down frequently, and might have left the president feeling as “stranded” as the thousands of workers who could not find transportation to get home.

At the end of Bachelet’s term, few Chileans would feel that they were part of a neoliberal success-story fairytale. In spite of the many campaign promises and some well-intentioned policies set in motion by an ambitious president, many con-

tinued to experience the ill effects of vast economic inequalities and blatant social injustices. The authors of this volume illustrate multiple shortcomings, contextualize mismanagement, and document political decisions that were questionable at best. Readers learn, in a compelling chapter coauthored by Eduardo Silva and Patricio Rodrigo, about the disappointing responses to demands by indigenous peoples and severe deficiencies in environmental reforms--and it is easy to see that indigenous and environmental demands were especially sensitive because of the potential threat they posed to the core values of capitalist enterprise. Few political leaders were prepared to question private property rights and the interests of business and industries.

The message of this excellent volume is not that blaming old structures, condemning the legacies of dictatorship, or finding the cause of all evils in the unfortunate ups and downs of the global marketplace should satisfy us. Instead, the authors show that we need to consider past and present factors and link those to the Chilean political trajectory to make sense of current inadequacies. This reader surely gained a better understanding of the interruption of the politics of consensus that followed immediately after the end of Bachelet's presidential term. For the first time in twenty years, the Concertación-coalition government's candidate lost the election, replaced by a president on the right of the political spectrum. Perhaps this dramatic change will inspire Chileans, both politicians and voters, to take a fresh look at consensus politics and to think of new strategies for a more democratic society.

(p. 8)

,

and#160;

,

economic policies,&#160;

-

C

of&#160;

on&#160;

to

.

,

T

Silvia&#160;

-

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

**Citation:** Jadwiga E. Pieper Mooney. Review of Borzutzky, Silvia; Weeks, Gregory B., eds. *The Bachelet Government: Conflict and Consensus in Post-Pinochet Chile*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. May, 2011.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31660>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.