

Crisis therapy and politics in Chile

Rodrigo Cordero Vega

University of Warwick, UK and Universidad Diego Portales, Chile

It is a common saying that situations of emergency are not the time for politics but rather for immediate intervention and prompt decision. The recent earthquake in Chile is not an exception. Given the dimensions of the catastrophe, the suspension of political argument in favour of managing the urgency of the humanitarian crisis sounds reasonable.

The state of emergency and despair in devastated towns in the south of the country was aggravated, so it is said, by the carnivalesque opportunism of some people (i.e. looting) and the government's disorganized response to the crisis. In this context calls for reinstating "public order" and "authority", a language in common use these days in Chile, materialized into a significant deployment of military forces aiming to take control of the situation. The difficult issue at stake here has little to do with the place of the military in a democratic society or with our troubled memories of past regimes. It is rather how the role of the army in the earthquake's aftermath has unexpectedly nourished a subtle neoconservative attack on politics, which is precisely the space that societies have available for working out situations of crisis.

It is one thing to call military forces to help rescue victims, distribute aid and carry out reconstruction efforts. It is another to construct an opportunistic image of military forces redeeming the failures of politics in its war against the forces of nature. Some of the media in Chile have given voice to this narrative. A case in point is the conservative newspaper *La Segunda*, which on 2nd March 2010 entitled an article "Great Military Force Enters Into Devastated Zone." The suggestion is that after tragic days a liberation army finally reached the city of Concepción, one of the most affected areas, being welcomed by cheering crowds thankful for their liberation from the forces of chaos.

A storyline that stresses the ineffectiveness of political resources for dealing with crisis also resonates with repeated comments that imply that the earthquake left half naked the hidden pathologies of Chilean society, whose now visible symptoms would find temporary relief only in the form of demonstrations of collective solidarity. Since politics is the space of disagreement and opposition per excellence, one should privilege "national unity" in times of crises.

It is no less curious to observe indications of this hostile attack on politics uncovered its *new* face a few weeks before the earthquake, when the now president Sebastian Piñera presented to the public his cabinet ministers. Using the formula of a "new style of government", Piñera's originality consisted in appointing a large number of high rated CEOs and professional consultants linked to private companies. The meaning of this gesture was to make explicit the inherent incapacity of politics to deal with evils as diverse as crime, slow economic growth, moral corruption and

unemployment. This republican ceremony (broadcasted live), in which new ministers were welcomed as long-awaited social therapists, looks now after the earthquake like a striking coincidence that oddly resembles the entrance of military forces into the city of Concepción.

It will be a major challenge for the new right-wing government to resist the temptation to believe that the crisis management of the earthquake aftermath, namely the process of reconstruction, is a matter of therapeutic politics, conducted by the military and CEOs, rather than politics itself.

At this time it may be wise not to forget, as Hannah Arendt once advised, that when the space of politics is under assault societies pave the way for turning crises into real catastrophes.