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Julieta Kirkwood: Rewriting History and Contesting the Present

Chilean history either erases women's participation or relegates it to brief sections on interest groups – auxiliary to the constitution of the official history. Not only is this male-constructed, yet seemingly neutral, history misrepresentative of women's participation, it falsifies the complexity of the Chilean context. Furthermore, history that distills women into objects, rather than subjects and agents within their own lived experiences, both masks and perpetuates a system of women's oppression. Julieta Kirkwood, renowned Chilean feminist of the Pinochet era, addressed the reinsertion of women into the official history as a principal step in achieving feminist consciousness. Kirkwood notes that history, as a neutral memory, erases the resistance and contestation that initially gave it its form. Since oppression necessarily instigates resistance, then women's resistance has systematically been ignored. By making visible the “disappeared” forms of women's resistance throughout history, Kirkwood contests the past as well as the present manifestations of women's oppression. Kirkwood as an intellectual and activist shapes both theorizations of feminism and its material practices – simultaneously contesting the past and actively constructing the present.

Kirkwood, born in 1936, was of the first generations of Chilean women to receive higher education. She graduated college in 1968, completing her degrees in both sociology and political science. Upon graduating, Kirkwood married her second husband, Rodrigo Baños, a fellow sociologist. Within four years she joined her husband as a sociologist and researcher for the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO), an organization dedicated to the

diffusion of social science research and its promotion of human rights and democracy. In 1973, for Kirkwood and for most of Chilean society, life changed drastically as the military coup toppled the Allende government and imposed a repressive regime targeting leftist intellectuals and activists. “After the coup, roughly 2,000 faculty were dismissed and more than 20,000 students expelled” (Chuchryk 161). This climate of fear forced middle-class, educated women to return to the domestic sphere – fully confronting the contradictory role of women. The first years of the dictatorship, therefore, became a period a self-reflection for Kirkwood which culminated in the vociferous role she played as a public feminist intellectual and activist in the last years of her life.

In 1979, the same year she become aware of her breast cancer, she began to actively organize against Pinochet. She began her activism with the foundation of *Círculo de Estudios de la Mujer*. In the next few years she would lead the formation of groups such as MEMCH '83, La Morada, el Centro de Estudios de la Mujer, and Mujeres por la Vida. In addition to the groups in which she participated or helped organize, she founded journals such as *el Boletín del Círculo de Estudios de la Mujer* and *Furia* in an attempt to project her theorizations of feminism and current dialogues and debates surrounding feminism to a wider public audience. Her articles quickly became widespread and became inspiring material for incipient feminist groups such as incarcerated women who transformed prisons into locales of feminist empowerment (Shayne 2). Although Kirkwood's activism was cut short in 1985, her six years as a public intellectual and activist created a feminism indigenous to the Chilean context that effectively inspired women's organizations and the rise of a feminist consciousness.

Julieta Kirkwood, in her articles, analyzed the different roles women played throughout Chilean history and how they have related to various political parties. Although a supporter of

the Allende government, Kirkwood criticizes the relationship between women and the Left, arguing that the Left's inability to address women's issues led women to historically embrace the Right. As a feminist theorist, Kirkwood has been acknowledged specifically for her discussions on the reinsertion of women into Chilean history, the analysis of patriarchy and authoritarianism, and the analysis of complex relationships between women and political parties throughout history. She quickly became a figurehead in women's movements during the Pinochet regime as she spoke out not only against the authoritarian regime but against authoritarian tendencies in all aspects of society – including their manifestations in Leftist ideology.

A Brief History according to Kirkwood's Methodology

Specifically analyzing Chilean history after 1900, Kirkwood identifies the period of 1913-1953 as a period of feminist critique and a contestation of the social order. Kirkwood analyzes various women in the labor force who became actors in social movements such as “mujeres de campamento”, “mujeres fabricanas”, elementary school teachers who participated in general teacher strikes, along with women writers and bohemians who participated in the feminine literary protests and became a presence within the hunger strikes against Carlos Ibáñez's dictatorship (55). Furthermore, before 1953, there were women's reading circles, a women's political party, a proemancipation organization and a confederation of over two-hundred women's groups (Noonan 89). The proliferation of women's groups and women's activism in the public sphere was critical to obtaining the right to vote in 1949.

However, the momentum of women's movements quickly dissipated due to the perception of the vote as a guarantee of gender equality. The ensuing “feminist silence” that would reign between 1949 and 1973 was not the removal of women from the public sphere, but

rather the integration of women into the traditional party system. In fact, the 1958 election proved the importance of women's vote as it became a decisive factor in the Conservative Party's presidential win. Recognizing the importance of this new voting bloc, massive projects were undertaken to appeal to women and to draw them into the political party system. The Christian Democratic Party began to establish mothers' centers and by 1968 there were 8,500 centers and more than 400,000 women participating (Noonan 93). These mothers' center would later be a locus of opposition during the Allende government, giving rise to groups such as Feminine Power, and would be adopted by the Pinochet regime to instill traditional feminine values of the self-abnegating and self-sacrificing mother and wife. Kirkwood's analysis of the integrationist model and the subsequent "feminist silence" leads her to critically analyze the relationship between women and political parties throughout the twentieth century.

Kirkwood in Context: The Authoritarian Regime and the Patriarchal Structure

Capitalizing on the success of women's movements against Allende, Pinochet maintained a gendered discourse, often referring back to the successes of the March of the Empty Pots and Pans in order to incorporate women within his "national reconstruction" project. This incorporation was an attempt to legitimize the regime through eliciting women's votes and political backing, rather than a genuine attempt to insert women into the public sphere. The network of mothers' centers loyal to the regime (CEMA-CHILE) and the National Secretariat for Women, under the direction of Pinochet's wife, became political tools to disseminate images of the traditional woman. The heightened discourse surrounding traditional family values, therefore, was an attempt to depoliticize women by relegating them to the domestic sphere. Lucía Hiriart de

Pinochet stated, “CEMA-CHILE is no longer a political entity,” demonstrating this desire to reaffirm women’s apolitical roles (Noonan 97).

While the regime espoused traditional family values, the developing opposition began to espouse the same values. “Women were defending the integrity of the family and the lives of their loved ones; Pinochet was defending the future of the Fatherland...both the state and women agreed that motherhood and family constitute the cornerstone of Chilean life” (Noonan 96). By mirroring the discourse of the state, albeit for different ends, women were able to provide themselves with a certain security during the most repressive years of the dictatorship. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the first women to “take to the streets” in 1975 did so as mothers through organizations such as The Chilean Association of the Relatives of the Detained and Disappeared.

Kirkwood, by analyzing the integration of women into political parties after 1949, warns that the use of maternalist rhetoric reduces all women’s interests to the mother-child relationship. In this era, “the variety of women’s political affairs became collapsed into and confused with a very specific, though important, aspect of women’s lives – their reproductive function” (Noonan 92). Although initially effective, maternalism confines women’s participation and could act as a determinant factor in the manner in which women are reinserted into the public sphere following a transition to democracy.

Diverging from the maternalist frame, Kirkwood analyzes the connection between authoritarianism and patriarchy, and its implications for women’s oppression. Pinochet, the protector of the fatherland, is the symbolic patriarch, thereby linking his political oppression to the oppression of women in the domestic sphere. Connecting these two spheres, Kirkwood “uncover[s] the connections between the underlying authoritarianism structures which govern

political (in a traditional sense) and personal (also political but in a nontraditional sense) relationships” (Chuchryk 168). The rise of a feminist consciousness, therefore, is directly linked to the rise of an authoritarian regime which enabled the diffuse manifestations of authoritarianism throughout the society to become self-evident. For this reason, in 1983, Kirkwood proposed the slogan “Democracy for the Nation and in the Home” which quickly became a trademark of left-wing women’s mobilizations during Pinochet’s regime (Ojeda 155).

Paradoxically, the repressive measures of the dictatorship ultimately opened up a variety of “spaces” for new political actors to emerge. Women for the first time since before 1953 were creating autonomous political groups – officially separating themselves from the traditional political system. On May 11, 1983, the Copper Workers Union called the first of a series of five protests, to be known as the “days of protest.” However, as Pinochet stepped up his repression, raising arrests from 1,213 in 1982 to 4,537 in 1983 and dismissing 1,800 strikers from their jobs, by the third day of the protest the Copper Workers Union could no longer organize the opposition (Noonan 101). The vacuum left by the union was quickly filled by human rights and feminist organizations. Taking advantage of this vacuum and with a desire to organize as feminists, the Feminist Movement, founded in part by Kirkwood, successfully organized the first feminist public demonstration – a five minute sit-in of sixty women on the National Library’s steps.

The curtailment of traditional leftist parties and repression within old political spaces forced women to not only take advantage of new political spaces but to create new ways of “doing politics.” “When the military dismantled the institutional structures for political participation, Chileans were obliged to invent new ways of ‘doing politics’ (hacer política)... the military unwittingly ensured that new forms of social movement mobilization would emerge”

(Chuchryk 172). Newly formed spaces like the popular economic organizations (OEPs) challenged the authoritarian regime through activities like soup kitchens, shopping collectives, and the production of *arpilleras*. All of these activities were organized by women and became a source of empowerment. Furthermore, they “challenge authoritarianism in a way that conventional political discourse cannot, precisely because their resistance to the regime, expressed in daily life survival strategies, *is* their discourse” (Chuchryk 155).

Contesting the Left

The dictatorship unintentionally functioned as a self-reflective mirror in which women were able to recognize their oppression by analyzing their participation within the Allende government and its inability to address women’s issues. “Confronted with the breakdown of ‘the political,’ these women questioned their own involvement in politics and the invisibility of women’s lived experience within the left’s political project” (Tobar 130). The rise of the patriarch and the normalization of hierarchical structures was ostensibly the binary opposite of Leftist ideologies of social equality. However, in their comparison, similarities between the two became painfully apparent. Policies and discourse surrounding gendered issues were peculiarly similar and were both grounded in a traditional understanding of the familial structure. While the Left saw itself as the champion of the proletarian family as the basic unit of the revolution, it did not critically analyze the systems of domination within this basic unit.

Kirkwood rejects the over-emphasis on the class struggle advanced by Leftist frameworks and analyzes it as a perpetuation of the public/private divide. Kirkwood notes,

En esta ámbito, los partidos populares...declaran asumir y expresar la contestación a los problemas sociales...pero la contestación que en general es expresada es una contestación indiferenciada que, al presuponer la existencia de un solo tipo de ciudadanos, reivindicará solo

una forma de subyugación y discriminación – la económica, política y de clases – y desconocerá otras discriminaciones específicas” (44).

By defining a citizen as constituted by his class, as the product of his employment in the public sphere, Leftist ideology ignores the systems of domination within the private sphere.

Furthermore, Kirkwood observes that while the democratization of the previous fifty years had politically incorporated multiple sectors of the society, women remained to be the sole group that was not addressed as such. Women were solely recognized as holding secondary positions within larger societal groups (Kirkwood 48).

Kirkwood insists that women’s oppression is not specifically a “women’s issue” but concerns all proponents of global liberation. By not analyzing and addressing all manifestations of domination and oppression in society, the social revolution will only solidify in other forms of domination. Therefore, Kirkwood proposes that feminism necessarily implies the destruction of old forms of societal order. Women’s demands can no longer be appealed to through small adjustments in the transition to democracy but rather, that feminism implies the destruction of this male-fabricated world order.

Co-optation or Unity: The Fear of Being Silenced

The destruction of the world order, proposed by Kirkwood, is therefore necessarily the reconceptualization of democracy. “Democratization for women has come to mean the democratization of daily life, self-determination, autonomy, and freedom from violence and oppression. A struggle for democracy must include a struggle for women’s liberation or it will not eliminate authoritarianism” (Chuchryk 168). This reconceptualization process, however, is perhaps situated at both the most advantageous and debilitating moment in Chilean history.

While repression of the traditional political system has opened new spaces for actors such as feminists to emerge and has unwittingly given them the critical tools with which to approach a meaningful feminist framework in Chile, the violence and reign of terror of the military dictatorship is irrefutable - divisions within the opposition could lay a debilitating blow to the country.

Both feminist and non-feminists alike, however, made efforts to unify against the military dictatorship. Kirkwood participated in the formation of a group of sixteen women from a wide range of political backgrounds named *Mujeres por la Vida*. In 1983, *Mujeres por la Vida* organized a demonstration of 10,000 women in the name of unity and peace at the Caupolicán Theatre. The demonstration refused to admit men as a condemnatory statement of men's lack of unity in opposing the dictatorship (Chuchryk 167). However, rifts within the women's opposition movement have continually made themselves present, culminating in the rejection of participation by many women's groups in the 1988 International Women's Day Celebration due to its explicitly partisan agenda (Chuchryk 174).

The desire for a transition to democracy, more often than not, overrode the divisions that become apparent within the women's opposition movement. Feminists, however, harkening back to the "feminist silence" of their predecessors, were distinctly aware of the ability of political parties to co-opt their movements. This co-optation would enable the transition of democracy to be a return to traditional order, continuing the oppression of women. The tension between autonomy and unification became apparent in the contentious relationship between Kirkwood's *Círculo de Estudios de la Mujer* and the *Academia de Humanismo Cristiano (AHC)*. Following a successful presentation in 1979 entitled "El trabajo de la mujer", a collection of women's testimonies on the new economic model, the AHC admitted the *Círculo de Estudios de la Mujer*

as a part of its umbrella organization providing it with a safe organizational space. However, as a part of the larger umbrella organization, the *Círculo de Estudios de la Mujer* was in a constant process of self-censorship in regards to topics such as divorce, abortion and sexuality. The contradictory relationship between feminist organizations and the Church came to a head in 1972 as a debate over women's issues went public. Kirkwood's subsequent publication of multiple articles directly opposing the stance of the Church led to the expulsion of the *Círculo de Estudios de la Mujer* from the AHC (Ojeda 155).

This tension between co-optation and unification on the one hand, and autonomy and divisive politics on the other, led to the strategy of "doble militancia". Feminist leaders became active both in traditional organizations, such as political parties, while simultaneously building a strong, autonomous feminist movement. "Doble militancia" allowed for a negotiated equilibrium between unity and autonomy enabling the protection of a feminist front untouched by co-optation while supporting and enhancing an opposition movement against Pinochet.

Conclusions

Julieta Kirkwood makes no claims to having fabricated a definitive feminist ideology, but rather states of her own work that it is "investigación-acción", namely a continual process of analysis and self-reflection (20). Furthermore, her theories are amenable to application. She stresses the importance of a full reinsertion of women into history and calls for women to express and display their lived experiences, regardless of their contradictory manifestations. Kirkwood states, "Necesitamos la confrontación y el juego de las ideas abiertas de par en par, millones de claridades, de pequeñas ideas" (21). It is only after women allow themselves to publicly address their lived experiences that they are able to identify their problems and personal issues in the

histories of other women. This identification leads to the critical erasure of the public/private divide in which women are able to project private oppression into the social order.

Furthermore, what becomes apparent is the manner in which the dominant ideology has isolated women, disabling their solidarity by reinforcing the division between the political public sphere and the non-political domestic sphere. Therefore, politics must traverse these barriers in what Kirkwood calls the “*revolución en la vida cotidiana*” (36). “Politics in action and the politicization of the private, of daily life, reflect women’s needs to root their understanding of oppression not in theoretical discourse but rather in their daily life experiences” (Chuchryk 175). Kirkwood’s intellectual contribution is fundamentally its ability to take root in individual life histories by attacking and analyzing multiple faces of women’s oppression. Although widely known in Chile, Kirkwood’s theories have yet to be translated. When cited, particular theories are isolated and appropriated to the author’s needs, with a critical emphasis on her analysis of authoritarianism and patriarchy. Rarely is there a unified analysis of the multiple dimensions of her theories that would illuminate their applicability to the Chilean context. However, her theories were born with the rise of the dictator, the lived trauma of the dictatorship became her tool for fomenting activism, structural change, and reflections on authoritarianism throughout society. As Kirkwood rewrites history, challenging both past and present, she actively works to shape a politics of daily life that authorizes a continual contestation of structures of domination.

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