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10/19/06

Single Point Paper #2: *Poder Femenino*: Shrewd, Not Apolitical

One of the most interesting features of the many female right-wing organizations that contributed to the downfall of Allende and the UP government was their declaration that they were apolitical. It may strike one as odd that groups dedicated to overthrowing an elected leader would try to characterize themselves as apolitical. However, if one looks at the case of *Poder Femenino*, one of the most influential of these groups, the logic of doing so becomes clear. The group needed a broad support base to accomplish its goals, and it could not gain the support of working and lower-class women if those goals were stated explicitly. In essence, *Poder Femenino* was an intrinsically political organization, with inherently political goals, whose success came from its ability to misrepresent itself as being outside of the political sphere and in support of Chilean women from all classes.

One group above all others was threatened by the Allende government, and that was the traditional, upper-class elite of Chile. Allende's numerous economic and social reforms were focused directly on dismantling the long-standing class system in order to create a more egalitarian state. According to Margaret Power, at one point Allende even characterized himself as "the president of the workers, the peasants, and the poor, not of all Chileans" (193). This attitude, coupled with attempts at economic reform that directly threatened their centuries-long dominance of Chile, galvanized the upper-class women that became the leadership of *Poder Femenino* to organize against Allende in defense of a rapacious status quo. Power had it right when she characterized *Poder Femenino* as a manipulative organization that was successful in mobilizing the middle and lower-classes in defense of traditional gender roles and, through shrewd maneuvering, class roles as well (251-252). However, she fails to analyze these women's actions properly within the context of the much more widespread, cross-gender anti-Allende

movement that included both the power-elite of Chile and the *gremio* movement.

Poder Femenino vigorously pursued and successfully included Chilean women from across the economic spectrum despite the organization's support for the politics of class stratification. Their success was founded upon the strategy of convincing Chilean women to vote for candidates or support policies that they said supported these women's value systems, rather than to vote for candidates or policies that were actually beneficial to the working and lower-class supporters of the organization. They were able to accomplish this by building on the successes of the 1964 and 1970 Scare Campaigns, as well as the March of the Empty Pots, and playing off of the fears associated with the prevailing wisdom with respect to the evils of communism. In the words of Carmen Frei, a senator from the Christian Democratic Party and a leader in *Poder Femenino*: “things polarized to such an extent that in the end there were only the communists and the anticommunists. I believe that this was the greatest damage that we all did to democracy in our country...This brutal polarization permitted the military coup to occur” (Baldez, 284). In this rare moment of regret from one of the former leaders of this organization, it is clear that these women were successful in their use of half-truths and misrepresentations of the Allende government to foster a cross-class state of political polarization that would foment a military coup in support of their upper-class interests. These women “ceased to support democracy, because it allowed anticapitalist forces to come to power” (Power, 253). It was this abandonment of the democratic process that both signified the success of the *Poder Femenino* movement and ultimately became its legacy.